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# Perceval's sister and Juliet Capulet as disruptive guides in spiritual quests

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# PERCEVAL'S SISTER AND JULIET CAPULET AS DISRUPTIVE GUIDES IN SPIRITUAL QUESTS

by

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*To Brian, my fellow pilgrim.*

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# ABSTRACT

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Perceval's sister in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Juliet in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* act as disruptive guides in spiritual quests by contradicting the expectations placed on them as women characters.

Though women are banned from the quest for the Holy Grail, Perceval's sister accompanies the Grail knights as an authoritative spiritual guide and a symbol of the Eucharist. Previous critics have not recognized Perceval's sister as a fundamental disruption to the systemic misogyny of the *Morte* or her Eucharistic significance. She challenges both the chivalric misogyny that sees her as an object of rescue and the spiritual misogyny that sees her as a detriment to holiness.

Though Romeo wants to use Juliet as a saintly conduit for his Petrarchan and Neoplatonic enlightenment through love, Juliet poetically resists her own canonization because she knows that being a saint means being dead and distant from Romeo. Past readers have not understood the necessity of Juliet's death in Juliet's sainthood or her poetic disruption of Petrarchan spiritual love. Shakespeare critiques Petrarchism in *Romeo and Juliet* by showing Juliet's death as a result of Romeo's poetic habits and showing Juliet as a disruptive poet who is aware of the danger.

# INTRODUCTION. THE "ART OF IMITATION" AND WOMEN CHARACTERS

## 0.1 Representation Matters

In this study, I examine the figures of Percival's unnamed sister in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. These fictional women act as disruptive guides in men's spiritual quests. Perceval's sister and Juliet Capulet exist in overwhelmingly patriarchal social and literary worlds where being a woman comes with oppressive expectations, particularly in the context of the spiritual quests undertaken by male characters. Perceval's sister is expected to be either an object of rescue or a sexual temptation, and at the very beginning of the Arthurian search for the Holy Grail, her presence on the spiritual quest is forbidden because she is a woman. Juliet is expected to be a saintly conduit for Romeo's spiritual quest for enlightenment in the Petrarchan and Neoplatonic paradigm of love. Both of these women characters disrupt the expectations placed on them. Perceval's sister joins the quest despite the ban on women. In defiance of both chivalric and spiritual misogyny in the *Morte*, she serves as an authoritative spiritual guide and becomes a symbol of the Eucharist, whose other symbol is the Grail itself. Juliet refuses the Petrarchan role of the distant and idealized saint who will inspire Romeo's spiritual enlightenment. She knows that saints have to be dead, and she pushes back against Romeo's poetry and works for more equitable communication and for love poetry in which she can be alive. Malory and Shakespeare complicate inherited gendered expectations and spirituality in their works by representing Perceval's

sister and Juliet as disruptive spiritual guides who resist the oppressive structures in which they live.

Reading resistance in the stories of fictional women is different from investigating women's historical conditions and from formulating feminist theory, though it intersects with both of these endeavors. The stories of Perceval's sister and Juliet do not accurately reflect the experiences of the real women contemporary with their authors, nor do they in themselves validate a theory of gender. While theory and history are both intrinsically part of this study—I read through a feminist hermeneutic and historicize beliefs about religion and love in the texts—what I am doing here is literary criticism. I am reading the stories of two fictional women, one medieval and one early modern, with careful attention to the ways in which these women characters resist patriarchal structures and the ways in which they can't. Giving new readings to old stories like this is a valuable pursuit for me both because old stories are a source of great delight in my own life and because literary representation, for good or ill effect, teaches people about what their lives are supposed to mean.

In his *Defense of Poesy* (composed about 1580), Sir Philip Sidney calls literature "an art of imitation" whose purpose is "to teach and delight."[1] In Sidney's view, "poetry" (his term for all imaginative literature) both imitates reality as it is and aspires to build a different and better reality by teaching its delighted readers, who will imitate the virtues they find in poetry. With Sidney, I consider the imaginative efforts of literary representation to be a worthwhile and endlessly fascinating aspect of human experience,

[1] Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy* in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 217. Sidney is not the first one to say this; he is quoting the classical Latin poet Horace. Yet Sidney's way of articulating the case for poetry is particularly germane to my study.

both shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the existing world and attempting to reshape that world in its own image. Literary characters, in Sidney's view, serve as guides to the real people who read the stories. Thus for Sidney, poetry is "an art of imitation" both in its creation, where its fictional representations imitate life, and in its intended reception, where readers learn virtue by imitating fictional characters.

Sidney, making his case for the special value of literary representation, argues that literature is better than either amoral history or abstract philosophy, because only literature has both practice and theory. In Sidney's view, the philosopher has "precept" and the historian has "example," but only the poet joins the two, and is thus better at teaching people to be virtuous.[2] Other sciences, Sidney says, may be useful in their own ways, but they do not bring about good deeds as effectively as literature does. Because "the astronomer, looking to the stars, might fall in a ditch" and "the mathematician might draw forth a straight line with a crooked heart," we know that these are all "but serving sciences…all directed to the highest end of the mistress-knowledge" which is "in the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well-doing and not of well-knowing only." And because "virtuous action" is "the ending end of all earthly learning," "those skills that most serve to bring forth that [virtuous action] have most just title to be princes over all the rest."[3] Literature, in Sidney's view, rises above other forms of learning because it is the most effective in convincing people to act virtuously. While I do not join Sidney in proclaiming that poetry is therefore objectively

[2] Sidney, *Defense*, 221.
[3] Sidney, *Defense*, 219-220.

superior to all other disciplines, I do agree that literary representation has a unique ability to shape people's aspirations and self-consciousness.

Sidney sees this poetic shaping of virtue to be especially effective in the examples provided by literary characters. When Xenophon writes stories about the heroic prince Cyrus, Sidney says that the author in the end works "to make many Cyruses, if they [the readers] will learn aright why and how that maker made him."[4] Readers are to understand the character Cyrus from literature (which delight induces them to read), to admire his virtue, and then to become versions of him in the real world. Literature draws readers to imitate virtue almost inevitably, in Sidney's view, when the readers see how beautiful and admirable is the virtue enacted by literary characters. Sidney rhetorically asks, "Who readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, and wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?"[5] Sidney thinks that readers who see this virtuous action as depicted by Virgil almost cannot help longing for a chance to imitate the filial loyalty and courage of Aeneas. For Sidney, literary characters are the most potent carriers of poetry's virtuous teaching.

But in Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, almost all of these literary guides to be admired and imitated are men. Though we know that Sidney thinks about women characters and women readers elsewhere, when he composes the *Arcadia* (written partly for his sister Mary and containing women characters with richly developed psychological and moral experiences), women are nonetheless nearly invisible in the *Defense*. In the *Defense,* men read about virtuous men and thereby become virtuous men themselves. Women remain

[4] Sidney, *Defense*, 217.
[5] Sidney, *Defense*, 227.

on the sidelines, or else they exercise virtue in ways that reinforce male control. One of the very few women characters Sidney gives as an example of virtue is Lucretia, a Roman wife who wins the praise of future generations by killing herself after she is raped. In order to explain the creative imitation of good poetry, Sidney considers a painter who can imaginatively represent "the constant though lamenting look of Lucretia, when she punished in herself another's fault, wherein he [the painter] painteth not Lucretia whom he never saw, but painteth the outward beauty of such a virtue."[6] In Sidney's analogy, the literary author, like the man who paints Lucretia, uses imaginative representation to invite readers toward virtuous action by identifying with and imitating characters. Yet for women, stories like Lucretia's make this imitation dangerous. Lucretia's story reinforces patriarchal control even as it extols feminine virtue—it implies that Lucretia's husband's exclusive sexual access to her is more important than the continuation of Lucretia's life. Lucretia's suicide is not treated as a lamentable response to sexual trauma, but as the height of her virtue. Readers in Sidney's generation may have found few virtuous *women* characters in the poetry they read, and even fewer whom they could hope to imitate without disaster.[7]

Literature, according to Sidney, teaches virtue, but medieval and early modern literature's teachings are often oppressive and convoluted concerning the moral nature of women and the kinds of virtue to which women can aspire. The period from Malory to Shakespeare is one in which religious identity and gender are both areas of intense

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[6] Sidney, *Defense*, 218.

[7] See also *Astrophil and Stella* 34 (in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)), where Sidney's speaker Astrophil accuses a woman of failing to imitate literary exemplaria correctly because she pities lovers in stories but does not transfer her pity in real life to him, the lover Astrophil.

thought and debate, for the people who lived in it and also for today's scholars. The Reformation (with its precursors and aftermath) changed not only the structures of communal religion, but also the ways individuals thought about themselves as spiritual subjects. Both of the texts I read here are written by men and contain, as Sidney would see it, types of men taken from reality and transformed in literature into ideals of character to be admired or censured. In this study, I attempt to look closely at the types of women these literary works contain, and if they teach, to see what it is that they teach about women.

As feminist readings have demonstrated cogently, literary representation has consistently been an important part of women's larger struggle for equality; perhaps this is because we know that imaginative representations of women make a difference, psychologically and practically, to the experiences of real women. In *The Canterbury Tales,* Geoffrey Chaucer's fictional Wife of Bath reacts violently to her husband's "book of wikked wyves" because she knows that its negative depictions of women not only make her feel bad but also justify men's retention of power.[8] The medieval Italian-French author Christine de Pisan, as the first person narrator of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, finds herself in distress as she tries to reconcile the negative things she reads about the nature of women in books with the experiences she has of her own behavior and other women's; Christine's dream-vision relieves this distress when Lady Reason appears to her and gives her the authority to challenge previous representations of women and build

[8] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), l. 685.

the City of Ladies by writing positive accounts of women.[9] Similarly, because she knows that poetic representation matters, the early modern English writer Emelia Lanier tries to revise religious accounts of women's blame and to highlight good female characters in *Salve Deus, Rex Judaeorum*, her own retelling of the story of Christ.[10] Across the centuries, a key part of women's work for equality has been the work of reading, re-reading, writing and re-writing stories, because representation matters.

Furthermore, understanding representations of women from past eras remains important in the larger context of feminism. Though the works of Malory and Shakespeare are not currently dominant forces in the shaping of the public imagination, they were once widely experienced as entertainment. These works are still important in themselves for those of us who have a particular enjoyment of old literature, but they were even more important to many more of our predecessors, and this historical weight, too, gives us another motive for working to understand how these literary works imagine women.

Failing to understand injustice toward underprivileged groups in the past can make us complacent about the same risks in the present or keep us ignorant of the vital work of those who have come before us—but the converse fault, assuming that underprivileged groups have always and everywhere lacked power and positive representation, can be equally pernicious. It can serve to naturalize inequality or make us imagine that we have accomplished more progress toward fairness than we really have. This importance of understanding both oppression and resistance in the past lends special

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[9] Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. B, ed. Martin Puchner (New York: Norton, 2012), 783-787.
[10] Emilia Lanier, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, in *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*, ed. A.L. Rowse (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1979) 77-137.

interest to the stories of Perceval's sister and Juliet, who exist at the confrontation point where oppression meets resistance.

Forgetting about the long legacy of such resistance and the historical variety of ways women have been represented in the past can efface the imaginative possibilities medieval and early modern writers explored and substitute trite stereotypes. For example, the 2010 video game *Dante's Inferno* depicts Beatrice as a damsel in distress whom the character Dante must rescue by fighting demons; whereas in Dante's 14th-century Italian poem, Beatrice is a powerful saint who can safely make her own journey through hell because she is invulnerable to its dangers, and it is she who actively works to save the character Dante's soul.[11] People (including my undergraduate literature students) who do not know about the Beatrice of the poem initially assume that Beatrice's feminine helplessness and Dante's masculine violence in the game are products of its medieval source, though in fact these elements of the game reflect not the medieval source, but rather modern day misogyny and artistic laziness. An overly homogenous view of women's representation in the past can allow such misogyny and artistic laziness to be fobbed off on fidelity to an imagined past that is much more vapid than the real past.[12] Understanding the variety of literary representations of women in past centuries, besides being good fun for feminists who like old books, gives necessary perspective for our social and creative endeavors in the present.

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[11] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Knopf, 1995), *Inferno* 2.82-93 and 61-66.

[12] For a discussion of this problem in the context of racial representation rather than gender, see the excellent blog, *Medieval PoC*, particularly the mission statement, found here: "Mission Statement" *Medieval PoC: People of Color in European Art History*, accessed September 13, 2016, http://medievalpoc.tumblr.com/missionstatement .

The continued importance of examining women's representation in art is illustrated by Gamergate, a recent outburst of nastiness on the internet. Gamergate, which started in online message boards and social networks, received coverage on most major news outlets in the US in 2014 as a power struggle in which male video gamers fighting for the status quo harass female game designers and critics, sometimes even making credible threats of death and rape. One of the primary targets of this ire is feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, whose online videos (in a series called *Tropes vs. Women*) examine how video games and other popular media represent women characters. Sarkeesian's videos are not made to be inflammatory, and she presents examples and analysis in a fairly staid, academic manner, defining critical terms for newcomers and analyzing extensive examples from games. For example, a 2013 video "explores how the Damsel in Distress became one of the most widely used gendered cliché in the history of gaming," and defines the trope as "a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must then be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or motivation for the protagonist's quest." Sarkeesian then discusses numerous examples of the trope from the Greek myth of Perseus and medieval chivalric literature to Donkey Kong and the Mario and Zelda franchises and explains why this pattern of representation is harmful to women.[13] Yet despite Sarkeesian's constant reminders that critical analysis is not meant to devalue media but to improve it, Sarkeesian's work strikes a nerve with many members of the gaming community and receives violently hostile responses—because problems of

[13] Anita Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress (Part 1) -- Tropes vs Women in Video Games," *Feminist Frequency*, March 7, 2013, https://feministfrequency.com/video/damsel-in-distress-part-1/ . Part 2 discusses more contemporary games' use of the trope.

women's representation are still with us. As Christine de Pisan and Emelia Lanier already knew from their medieval and early modern perspectives, control over representation comes with far-reaching implications. Doing the critical analysis to understand women's representation in imaginative fiction has been and remains important in the larger contexts of the cultural work for women's equality and the intellectual enterprise of feminist reading.

The stories of Perceval's sister and Juliet are particularly worth such critical attention because these characters exist at a conflict point of oppression and resistance. Perceval's sister and Juliet both exist in patriarchal settings where their gender is used against them, and they are both killed off before expressing their full potential—yet they also present powerful examples of resistance, disrupting the spiritual expectations placed on them and challenging misogyny at an imaginative and conceptual level. In some ways we have moved on from the institutionalized misogynies that constrained Perceval's sister and Juliet, and in some ways we have not. Their creative disruptions of pervasive misogyny, written into the stories by canonical male authors centuries ago, challenge both a flatly bleak conception of the sexist past and the corresponding self-congratulatory complacency about the present. And these women's resistance is something that we still need.

## 0.2 Women's Deaths and Literary Meaning

Perceval's sister in the *Morte Darthur* and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* are both women characters whose lives and deaths are used symbolically by men, but who also resist the

meanings placed on them. Both of these women become part of men's spiritual quests and yet also insist on their own disruptive interpretations. They talk back to the conventions of gender and of genre that would otherwise read them for the uses of men. Perceval's sister tells the Grail knights the ancient history of artifacts on Solomon's ship, and she interprets the events favorably toward Eve and Solomon's wife, women who have often borne the brunt of religious sexism. Juliet uses brilliant poetry to counter Romeo's Petrarchan representation of her and negotiate for a better role. However, both Perceval's sister and Juliet die. After spending their short literary lives actively re-interpreting themselves to their companions, they lose their lives and thereby become symbolic objects to be interpreted by the survivors. These women's deaths are supposed to mean something, and that something is not necessarily about them.

The 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch makes the death of a woman the psychological turning point of his love poetry. Petrarch's collected love poems, the *Rime Sparse*, are traditionally divided into two sections: the poems set while the beloved lady is alive are called *In Vita,* and those set after her death are *In Morte*.[14] The *In Vita* poems record (among other things) how the speaker falls in love with a beautiful woman named Laura, his brief but intensely felt encounters with her, and the vicissitudes of his love over the years when she is alive. The *In Morte* poems grapple with his grief at her death, tell of imagined encounters with her spirit, and generally try to work through what Laura *means* to the speaker and to his own poetic and spiritual development. Laura's death is an

[14] See Cook's introduction to Francis Petrarch, *Petrarch's Songbook: Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta,* trans. James Wyatt Cook, Italian text ed. Gianfranco Contini (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), 21-22, on the two-part structure of the poetic collection. I will discuss Petrarch's poems further in Chapter 3 as a background for Romeo's poetic habits.

event imbued with almost supernatural significance, and it ultimately becomes more about the speaker's interiority than about Laura.

This literary tradition of deriving extraordinary meaning from a woman's death begins long before Petrarch and continues long after him, in various genres and places. In *The Aeneid*, the pyre where Dido burns herself on the beach in Carthage *means* that Aeneas' resolve to found Rome as he is fated to do is stronger than his personal attachments. In the structure of the epic, Dido's death is not about Dido but about Aeneas. She ultimately dies for the male protagonist's character development. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in the feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic*, examine the veritable massacre of good female characters in 19th-century American literature, where women are held up as angels and lauded for self-sacrifice. They quote Edgar Allen Poe's opinion that the *death* of a "beautiful woman" is "the most poetical topic in the world." Here, Gilbert and Gubar point out, "to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead."[15] Both women characters' spiritual achievements and the texts' literary meanings often require the women to be so self-effacing that they are no longer alive. In comics, women who die or suffer severe trauma as a plot device have been dubbed "women in refrigerators" by Gail Simone because of a particularly gruesome issue of *Green Arrow* where the hero finds his girlfriend's chopped up remains left in his refrigerator by the villain, prompting an angst-ridden quest for vengeance.[16] The makers of the story, like

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[15] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1979), 25.

[16] See Gail Simone, "Front Page," *Women in Refrigerators*, 1999, http://lby3.com/wir/index.html for more on the origin of the term and for a distressingly extensive list of women characters in comics who suffer similar fates.

the myriad before them, use a woman's death to generate plot, motivation, and meaning for male characters' stories.

Because Perceval's sister and Juliet are also characters whose deaths take on special meaning for others, I give their chapters the Petrarchan titles *In Vita* and *In Morte* to acknowledge that while their resistance is remarkable, it is also structurally contained by their deaths. Perceval's sister and Juliet, while they are alive, work to change the way that they are interpreted; however, these characters have limited control over the way others derive meaning from their deaths. In the case of Perceval's sister, Malory makes her posthumous interpretation as a figure of the Eucharist a continued challenge to the marginalization of women on the spiritual quest. In the case of Juliet, Shakespeare highlights her inability to neutralize the deadly implications of Petrarchan poetry by having the characters who posthumously interpret Juliet directly contradict what she wanted in life. The following *In Vita* chapters mainly analyze the events that take place while the character in question is alive, while the *In Morte* chapters cover the death scenes and posthumous interpretations of the characters and—as per Petrarch's *In Morte* poems—grapple with what each of these dead women characters means in her text.

## 0.3 Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, "Perceval's Sister *In Vita*," I argue that Perceval's sister in *Le Morte Darthur* disrupts the secular misogyny of King Arthur's court and the spiritual misogyny of the quest for the Holy Grail by acting as a spiritual guide. Arthurian knights following the Oath they take every Pentecost define themselves by rescuing women. Grail quest

knights, following the ban on women at the very start of their quest, define themselves by avoiding women as sexual temptation. Perceval's sister disrupts the *Morte*'s double-edged misogyny by allowing the knights to do neither of these things. Instead, she is an essential spiritual authority who does not require the knights' aid and is not sexually available to them. She interprets the stories of Eve and Solomon's wife positively, establishing ancient precedent for her own spiritual leadership as a woman.

In Chapter 2, "Perceval's Sister *In Morte*," I argue that Perceval's sister becomes a symbol of the Eucharist—and, by proxy, of the Holy Grail itself—and that this is her most fundamental disruption of spiritual misogyny. She refuses to be relegated to the margins of the Grail quest, and her Eucharistic symbolism undermines misogyny elsewhere in the text and reframes the issue of asceticism central to the quest for holiness. In both of these chapters, I compare Malory's *Morte* with the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the French source for the Grail Quest section, and I argue that Malory's changes to the source enhance the autonomy, authority, and strength of Perceval's sister. Perceval's sister is a spiritual guide who claims her place at the center of the spiritual quest.

In Chapter 3, "Juliet *In Vita*," I argue that Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* resists becoming the object of Romeo's Petrarchan spiritual quest. In this play set in Italy, Shakespeare writes Romeo as a character who exemplifies Italian forms of love poetry. Petrarchan poetry and Neoplatonic love represent the lady as a conduit for the male poet-lover's spiritual ascent, but in the meeting sonnet and the balcony scene, Juliet pushes back against Romeo's poetry and negotiates a more human role for herself. Juliet is addressed as a saint, but saints have to be dead, and Juliet poetically advocates for her desire to stay alive as a fellow pilgrim with Romeo.

In Chapter 4, "Juliet *In Morte*," I argue that Shakespeare uses Juliet's death as a critique of Petrarchan poetry. In the tomb scene, Romeo's status as a Neoplatonic, Petrarchan lover contributes to the tragic ending as he continues to read Juliet as a saint. When Montague and Capulet pledge to build commemorative statues of the lovers, both Juliet and Romeo are reduced to the state of the Petrarchan lady whose meaning is determined by others. Nevertheless, Juliet is the moral and spiritual center of the play, a spiritual guide whose poetically brilliant disruption of Petrarchism and Neoplatonic love creates turbulence in the play's most lyrical moments.

Perceval's sister and Juliet both resist expectations: Perceval's sister is neither a damsel in distress nor a temptress, and Juliet is not a Petrarchan lady who will act as a passive conduit for Romeo's spiritual ascent. The male knights' quest for the Holy Grail is a literal journey across the landscape, while Romeo's spiritual quest is a more abstract search for personal enlightenment through love—yet the Grail seekers and Romeo alike begin their spiritual quests by placing oppressive expectations on women. The Grail knights expect all women to be anti-spiritual, antithetical to the holy aims of the quest, while Romeo expects Juliet to be hyper-spiritual, his own personal key to enlightenment. These expectations are two complementary sides of spiritual misogyny, and both of them function to dehumanize and silence women. By representing Perceval's sister and Juliet as women who talk back to such spiritual misogyny, Malory and Shakespeare interrogate the social expectations of gender and the literary expectations of genre placed on women characters. Perceval's sister and Juliet are disruptive guides who rewrite the roles given to

them—Perceval's sister by helping the Grail knights quest for spiritual mysteries, and Juliet by refusing to help Romeo as a passive stepping stone on his spiritual quest.

# CHAPTER 1. PERCEVAL'S SISTER *IN VITA*

## 1.1 Women and Religion in *Le Morte Darthur*

Thomas Malory's late fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur* presents a wide range of female characters and a good deal of confusion about what they can do and what they mean. Women are sometimes damsels in distress, sometimes powerful sorceresses, sometimes sexual rewards or temptations, and sometimes holy ascetic visionaries. Though there are vastly fewer women than men among Malory's characters, the women arguably appear in a greater range of types and functions. The male-dominated institutions of Malory's text attempt to contain this variety of feminine character and define women according to men's own needs. In The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal, Malory's implications about women are particularly paradoxical. Here, the quest for the Holy Grail begins with a hermit's ban on women. The hermit Nacien sends word "that none in thys queste lede lady nother jantillwoman with hym" so that the knights can be pure enough to pursue the Grail (675).[1] In episodes that confirm Nacien's warning, devils in female form tempt the Grail knights to stray from their spiritual calling. But despite the Grail quest's framework of spiritual misogyny, the knights actually need women as instructors and guides in order to finish the quest. The most prominent of these female guides is Sir Perceval's unnamed sister, who accompanies the knights in the penultimate stages of the journey but dies sacrificially before they reach the end. In her life (the subject of this chapter), Perceval's sister presents a challenge to the knights' chivalric

[1] Citations from Malory's *Morte* will be given parenthetically from Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, vol. 1, ed. P.J.C. Field (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013).

expectations that women must be rescued, and she acts as an essential spiritual authority, reversing the knights' spiritual expectations that women endanger men's souls. In her death (discussed in Chapter 2), Perceval's sister embodies not fleshly sin (as the hermit's message implies of women in general) but the sacramental mystery of the Grail itself: the Eucharistic union of the bodily and the spiritual.

While some critics have acknowledged Perceval's sister as a saintly figure and an indictment of the male knights' holiness as individuals, her more fundamental disruption of systemic and ideological misogyny in the *Morte* has gone unrecognized.[2] She presents a genuine challenge to the assumptions about women enforced at the start of King Arthur's reign and during the Grail story. The text represents Perceval's sister as a spiritual leader who does not need to be rescued and who reflects the Eucharistic meaning of the Grail quest; this representation challenges *both* the spiritual and the secular assumptions about women voiced elsewhere in the text and reframes key issues of gender, sanctity, and identity.

Internal conflicts like those surrounding Perceval's sister are particularly disruptive given the *Morte*'s construction and reception as a work that should teach readers how to act; such tensions make the lessons of the *Morte* much more complex, especially for women readers. Though it was composed about a century before Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* nevertheless fits Sidney's fundamental ideal of literature as an imaginative work meant to teach and delight. With the intent of

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[2] See Donald Hoffman, "Perceval's Sister: Malory's 'Rejected' Masculinities," *Arthuriana* 6. no. 4 (1996), 73, 78 for Perceval's sister as a Christ figure; Alfred Robert Kraemer, *Malory's Grail Seekers and Fifteenth-Century English Hagiography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 65, 81-82 and Janina P. Traxler, "Dying to Get to Sarras: Perceval's Sister and the Grail Quest," in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 272-74 for Perceval's sister as a saint.

teaching, Malory even addresses his audience from time to time in order to make sure that readers are learning the correct lessons from the work: At the point in the story where the usurper Mordred has gained support against King Arthur, Malory interrogates readers, "Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was?" and warns them against the hazards of being disloyal and "new-fangill" (916-17).[3] The printer William Caxton, in his preface to the widely-read 1485 edition of the *Morte*, also declares a didactic "entente" for publishing the work: "And I, accordying to my copye, have doon sette it in enprynte, to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the jentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knightes used in tho dayes[.]" He urges gentlemen of his own day to learn from the "vertuous dedes" of knights from the legendary Arthurian past. As Caxton continues his explanation of the *Morte*'s moral value, he expands his audience, exhorting not only "al noble lordes" but also "ladyes, wyth al other estates of what estate or degree they been of" to "take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce and to folowe the same."[4] Malory turns to his readers and gives direct didactic asides, and Caxton similarly believes that Malory's work as a whole should teach men and women how to act through its examples of noble actions.

Though Caxton expects "ladyes" to learn from the *Morte*, the text's lessons for women are less frequent and more repressive than those for men. Scores of virtuous knights learn to exemplify courage, friendship, mercy, and honor as Arthur's court rises to become a paragon society of knightly virtue. During the portions of the text that center on the rise of Arthurian chivalry, however, women and their moral goodness or badness

[3] See Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur,* ed. Stephen Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004) note 6 on page 680 for other addresses to readers.
[4] Caxton, William, "Prologue to the 1485 Edition," reprinted in Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Shepherd, 817.

are typically interpreted in relation to men and to the chivalric social structures dominated by men. Geraldine Heng claims that the magic-wielding women of the text are judged as "beneficent" or "malign" merely based on "the relative usefulness or threat of their presence to knightly society."[5] Moral judgments about women in the *Morte* typically align with the interests of its center of power, Arthur's chivalric court. As Janet Jesmok observes, a woman can "actively gain her worship" and "get beyond helplessness" in Malory mainly by "becom[ing] an active supporter of chivalry."[6] Yet many women in the *Morte* support chivalry by remaining passive as objects of exchange or rescue for the male protagonists. Indeed, Dorsey Armstrong claims that women in the text most often function—precisely *by* being helpless—to define male strength and courage: "Knights in Malory," she says, "always read women as vulnerable, helpless, and ever in need of the services of a knight—in short, the object through and against which a knight affirms his masculine identity."[7] In the chivalric order, then, men see themselves as strong by reading women as helpless, always in need of rescue.

I see a similar but modified gender dynamic in the Grail quest: Here, men instead construct themselves as holy by reading women as sinful. My claim that men in the Grail quest define their own holiness against the imagined sinfulness of women builds on

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[5] Geraldine Heng, "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory," in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context*, eds. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), 290.

[6] Janet Jesmok, *Malory's Women* (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1979), 49. See also Lisa Robeson, "Women's Worship: Female Versions of Chivalric Honour," in *Arthurian Studies LX: Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur*, eds. K.S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), especially 111-112, for a more detailed discussion of the term *worship* in its application to women. Robeson finds that women's worship is different from men's and most often depends on chastity.

[7] Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003), 36. Armstrong claims that the passive Igrayne "stands out as *the* exemplary female in Malory's text, quickly and silently adapting to the needs and wants of the men who fight over and exchange her" (47).

Armstrong's reading of the way masculine chivalric society defines itself by constructing gender binaries. I argue that while men in the Grail quest continue to define themselves against women (as Armstrong says that they do in secular chivalric society), the terms of the opposition have changed—instead of physical vulnerability, women represent sin to the knights on the Grail quest. In the larger context of Malory studies, my claim that knights define themselves against women in a different way in the Grail quest contributes in two main ways: It brings more nuance to the much debated questions of gender and power in Malory, and it helps to explain the continuities and contrasts of the Grail quest's relationship with the rest of the *Morte*.

Critics have often neglected the Grail quest and religious themes in Malory's *Morte*, regarding the Noble Tale as a badly patched in digression. Many of those who compare Malory's version of the Grail quest with its French source, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, think that Malory bungles religious meanings in the *Queste* or that his priorities even in his version of the Grail quest remain secular. Esther Casier Quinn, for example, claims that Malory's changes to the Queste "obscure both its religious significance and poetic integrity."[8] Jill Mann argues that the Grail quest story in Malory subordinates spiritual values to the glorification of secular knighthood. According to Mann, Malory "sees the Grail narrative as the apotheosis of chivalric experience."[9] I instead argue, alongside others such as Dhira B. Mahoney and Armstrong, that though Malory is not

[8] Esther Casier Quinn, "The Quest of Seth, Solomon's Ship and the Grail," *Traditio* 21 (1965), 186. See also Kraemer, *Malory's Grail Seekers*, 1-3, for an outline of critical views on how Malory handles religion in his source texts.

[9] Jill Mann, "Malory and the Grail Legend" in *A Companion to Malory*, Arthurian Studies 37, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996), 208, 220. Mann makes a brilliant argument paralleling bloodshed for knights in combat with Christ's redemptive bloodshed at the crucifixion, but I do not think her resulting view of the quest as an "apotheosis of chivalric experience" holds up against the resounding failures of secular chivalry throughout Malory's Grail quest.

interested in the Grail quest for the same reasons as the authors of his source texts, the Grail quest is not a mere digression, nor does Malory co-opt it to reinforce the secular chivalric values celebrated earlier in the text.[10] The high spiritual aspirations and moral obligations of the Grail quest cannot be dismissed once they have been raised. The Grail quest brings uncomfortable scrutiny, not validation, to secular knighthood. While the quest is ultimately achieved by Galahad, who is a knight, Malory's knights in general do not fare well on the quest, and their spiritual success (as Lancelot so starkly proves) is not proportional to their chivalric success. Malory chooses to include moments of confusion—especially ones where the knights are doing exactly what they ought to do according to chivalric standards and yet find their actions condemned in the Grail quest. He allows holy hermits to expose (in the words of one Dennis the Peasant) "the violence inherent in the system."[11]

Malory thus undermines the whole knightly motivation of winning worship, introducing the competing concept of a humbler devotion to God in which personal glory is vain. Malory does not, I think, mean to undermine secular chivalry entirely, and his admiration and affection for his chivalric stories and characters is evident. Nevertheless, I believe that he is aware of flaws in the secular chivalric ideal and that in the Noble Tale, he poses some difficult questions about that chivalric ideal and never really answers

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[10] Dhira B. Mahoney, "The Truest and Holiest Tale: Malory's Transformation of *La Queste del Saint Graal*," in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 380. Mahoney argues that Malory "faithfully transmits the central dichotomy of the *Queste* between worldly and spiritual chivalry, whereby the traditional chivalric standards are reinterpreted in light of spiritual values. However, at the same time, by cutting much of the doctrinal exegesis of the French he shows that he is not sympathetic to its typological method." Armstrong, in *Gender and the Chivalric Community* 147 and 146, argues that "the 'Tale of the Sankgreal' serves as the hinge, the turning point around which the narrative of the *Morte d'Arthur* as a whole revolves" and that it "critiques the ideal of knighthood upon which the chivalric society is predicated."

[11] *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directed by Terry Gilliam, (1975; London, UK).

them. Thus, Malory uses the Grail quest to illuminate the failures and inconsistencies of Arthurian chivalry. The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal stands in a unique relationship to the rest of the text, introducing elements of tension and critique to the chivalric values expressed in the rest of the work.

Moreover, at this crux of the narrative, gender remains a defining issue, and while women characters in the rest of the *Morte* have received a great deal of critical attention, scholars have often dismissed the women characters in The Noble Tale. Elizabeth Edwards claims that "On the Grail quest, women are utterly without an objective existence, even that of the shadowy and sinister women of adventure."[12] While Armstrong recognizes the centrality of the Grail quest and the continued significance of gender as the knights negotiate their masculine identities, she minimizes the role of women in the Grail quest. She notes that with some exceptions, "the typical character of the mediating quest maiden is strikingly absent from the grail narrative" and goes on to argue that "the place of the feminine has been taken by a series of holy figures—hermits, good men, the occasional anchoress, and disembodied voices—whose conditions of chastity and virginity resist the mark of gender."[13] I argue instead that the Noble Tale continues to deal with how both women and men shape and are shaped by gender identities. This means that for Perceval's sister, chastity does not make gender a moot

[12] Elizabeth Edwards, "The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996), 43. Edwards goes on to say that women in the Grail quest story "exist only as part of the theological signifying system, which for the most part assimilates the female with the diabolical." See my discussion in Chapter 2 of Perceval's sister as a Eucharistic symbol.

[13] Armstrong, 146. Armstrong does acknowledge Perceval's sister as a variation on the quest maiden. See also Peggy McCracken, "Chaste Subjects: Gender, Heroism, and Desire in the Grail Quest," in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 123-24 and Megan Arkenberg, "'A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood': Galahad's Asexuality and its Significance in *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 24 no. 3 (2014), 3-5.

point. Her sexual behavior (celibacy) and her gender identity (as a woman) are separate issues. The women and men in the Grail quest story do not exist outside of the complex cultural signifying systems of gender simply because no one is having any sex. Perceval's sister still navigates her relationship with the world as a woman, and she must conform to or disrupt her community's expectations of what it means to be a woman. Perceval's sister is not given in marriage to a worthy knight, directly threatened with rape, or smitten with a doomed desire for Lancelot (most of the women outside the Noble Tale of the Sankgreal have at least one or two of these things happen to them), and she remains celibate throughout her short life; nevertheless, other characters prescribe and interpret her behavior according to her status as a woman. I argue that as the Grail quest interrogates the violence by which male knights establish their maleness and knightliness, it simultaneously interrogates the ways in which chivalric and spiritual communities construct feminine identity.

The knights continue to define themselves by contrasts with women in The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal, even though the holy quest changes many of the rules for knightly action. When knightly values move from violent physical power in the secular quests to virtuous and chaste living the Grail quest, knights continue to separate themselves from women, but they no longer do so by emphasizing women's physical weakness. Here in the Grail quest, women are instead seen as dangerous to the knights' ability to be holy: the hermit Nacien prohibits women's presence on the quest as antithetical to the holy "mysteryes" of the Grail (675), Sir Lancelot blames Guenevere for his spiritual insufficiencies (696, 791), and the devil appears in female form to seduce both Perceval and Sir Bors (709-712; 739-740). The knights believe that they can preserve their own

sanctity and virtue by avoiding women. In the chivalric order, then, women are objects of rescue, while in the spiritual order, they must be shunned as detrimental to the knights' holiness. In Malory's chivalric misogyny, knights define themselves as strong against women's need for help; in Malory's spiritual misogyny, knights define themselves as holy against women's sinfulness.[14]

Though these dual chivalric and spiritual misogynies are indeed fundamental elements of Malory's story, the text also contains resistance to these limiting concepts of female behavior throughout. As critics have observed, women characters in the story challenge the roles laid out for them by Malory's version of Arthurian society. Heng sees a continuous counter-narrative of feminine power in the *Morte*. "The disruptive gestures and energies, intrusions and interruptions that are lodged within surface textuality ultimately point to a submerged second narrative interplaying with and often prompting the first, and marked by a recognizably feminine voice," Heng claims.[15] To date Morgan le Fay and Queen Guenevere have received the most critical attention as women characters who subvert male dominance and challenge expected roles, and they attract attention for good reason. Morgan, Arthur's half-sister, learns scholarship and magic in a nunnery (4), transgresses societal rules sexually (114-15), and poses a real threat to Arthur's life and rule through her magic powers (106-124, etc).[16] Guenevere is certainly the most compellingly human woman character in the *Morte*—Edwards calls her

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[14] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 2005), especially 141-2, where Greenblatt argues that male love lyricists define themselves as stable and self-sufficient entities against the "destructive mutability" of women. Such acts of self-fashioning at the expense of others are certainly not a new invention of the early modern period, but Greenblatt examines their mechanisms fruitfully.

[15] Heng, 283.

[16] For recent attention to Morgan la Fey's origins and reception, see Kristina Pérez, *The Myth of Morgan la Fey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Malory's "most striking character" of all.[17] Guenevere's adulterous affair with Lancelot is the catalyst for the final ruin of Arthurian society, and yet, by the end, she becomes a spiritual leader: Jesmok contends that after the Grail quest and the breakdown of the kingdom, "Only Guinevere fully appreciates the world-change; she assesses the situation, decides on her future, and, consequently, points the remaining few in a new direction."[18] Guenevere and Morgan challenge the preconceptions of women present in the text.

In this chapter, I contend that Perceval's sister, the Grail quest guide, in many ways even more fundamentally challenges the misogyny expressed in the text. She seems an odd choice to put beside these powerful queens as a challenge to male dominance: Perceval's sister does not even have a name, and she obligingly helps male knights as they approach the Holy Grail until she dies through bloodletting according to the evil custom of a castle, after which her remains are put on a boat, and she reaches the holy city of Sarras only as a corpse. On the surface, she seems like the woman least likely to threaten the structures of Arthurian patriarchy. However, I argue that in imaginative terms, Perceval's sister is a greater threat to Arthurian patriarchy than either Morgan or Guenevere because she persistently defies both of its key expectations for women: helplessness and sinfulness. Unlike Guenevere, she does not allow male knights to rescue her (and see themselves as powerful, by contrast), and unlike Morgan, she does not allow male knights to see her as sinful (and themselves as holy, by contrast); thus she frustrates both chivalric and spiritual misogyny on a conceptual level.

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[17] Edwards, 50.

[18] Janet Jesmok, "Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgment and Wisdom in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009): 39. Jesmok goes so far as to say that "No one in the *Morte* demonstrates a more profound understanding of Christian belief than Guinevere." See also Armstrong, 199-202.

While other women characters (including Guenevere sometimes and Morgan most of the time) successfully leverage Arthurian gendered symbolism in order to achieve their own goals, Perceval's sister instead disrupts the whole system by which knights define themselves against women. And she does so not simply by avoiding the allegedly feminine faults of weakness and sensuality, but rather through active courage and active holiness of her own. She chooses her own death rather than allowing the knights to rescue her. Even more remarkably, she is not merely a good woman in a book full of devil women, but also a figure who embodies the Eucharistic qualities of the Grail itself. She is not outcast from the spiritual mysteries of the Grail, as women are expected to be; instead, she embodies those spiritual mysteries. She is a character who brings tension to the text's representation of women because she does not need knightly help and because she has unique access to the spiritual significance of the Grail; this means that she challenges both chivalric and spiritual attempts to pigeonhole women's roles for the symbolic benefit of male characters.

## 1.2 The Oath and the Ban

Perceval's mild-mannered sister is so challenging because she directly contradicts the beliefs that Malory's Arthurian society holds about women. To be specific about these beliefs concerning women, I consider in some depth two foundational moments: the Pentecostal Oath given early in Arthur's kingship and Nacien the hermit's prohibition of women at the beginning of the Grail Quest. The Pentecostal Oath has rightly received much scholarly attention because it is likely original to Malory and because it is the text's

most direct explanation of what Arthurian chivalry is supposed to be.[19] At the feast of Pentecost immediately after a series of quests in which knights have failed to live up to chivalric ideals, Arthur admonishes his knights—and they swear immediately afterward and then annually at every Pentecost—

> never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of theire worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evir more; *and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes soccour, strengthe hem in hir rightes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe.* Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell, for no love ne for no worldis goodes. (97, my emphasis)

The instruction about women—the "ladies clause"—demands particular scrutiny here because as well as instructing the knights, it also sets up expectations for the role of women in Malory's rendition of Arthurian society. Armstrong notes that while the Oath "offers explicit protection to women in the ladies clause, it also simultaneously and deliberately constructs them as 'feminine' in the chivalric sense—helpless, needy, rape-able." The Oath, on the surface, regulates behavior for knights, but built into that behavioral regulation for male knights is a whole mode of being for women. And the knights, as Armstrong argues, benefit from this codified feminine helplessness: "The threat of sexual violence—and the need to protect women from it—provides knight after knight with the opportunity to test and prove his prowess and knightly identity."[20] If "allwayes" saving women is one of the defining behaviors of an Arthurian knight (and the Oath says that it is), that means that there must always be women in danger and in need of help in order for Arthurian knights to exist as such. In the Pentecostal Oath and in

[19] In addition to Armstrong's *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, see Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) for sustained attention to the Pentecostal Oath.
[20] Armstrong, 36.

the stories of chivalric heroism predicated on it, male knights continually define themselves against the idea of endangered, helpless women. Perceval's sister, I argue, disrupts this concept of women as perpetually in need of rescue and denies the knights the ability to define themselves as strong against a helpless femininity.

Perceval's sister also disrupts another set of limiting expectations in the new paradigm of The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal. Here the knights, after several hundred pages of chivalric heroism as governed by the oath, must learn new skills and identities as they strive to become "knyghtis of hevynly adventures" (721). In pursuit of the Holy Grail, they must reconsider the lessons of the Oath. The Holy Grail, the object of their quest, is a relic from Christ's time (783) known to contain some of Christ's blood (643) and appears as a Eucharistic vessel many times in the *Morte* (773-4, 782-3, 787).[21] It also has an unnerving habit of teleportation, and it appears to Arthurian knights in elusive and alluring partial visions. After experiencing one such partial vision of the Grail in Arthur's hall, the knights rush off, intoxicated with the desire for a more perfect sight of the Grail (674-6). In order to pursue this sacred quest of the Holy Grail, knights—and, I argue, women too—must re-evaluate what they have learned about their secular identities. In the spiritual realm of the Grail quest, knights find themselves struggling to understand a counterintuitive new set of rules, whether or not they excelled in the lessons of earthly chivalry. Sir Gawain, for example, discovers that killing opponents in combat (a commonplace for knights in the secular chivalric portions of the text) counts as murder in the Grail quest (729). Sir Lancelot, who was the best knight in the world before the Grail

[21] See also Robyn Malo, *Relics and Writing in Late Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 101-124 for an excellent discussion of the Grail's function and complications as a Christian relic of Jesus' blood.

quest began, tries to do the honorable thing by taking the part of the losing side in a tournament, but he then finds he has taken the side that allegorically represents sin, and his attempt at "incresying of hys shevalry" is condemned as mere "vayneglory of the worlde" (719, 721). If the *Morte* teaches virtuous deeds, as Sidney and Caxton would have it, it also contains conflicted and contradictory lessons: Some of the most difficult tensions in the work arise between the chivalric virtue that the Arthurian court promotes and the spiritual virtue that the otherworldly Grail quest demands.

The hermit Nacien's ban on women is one of the first expressions of the new spiritual values on the Grail quest; I argue that just as the Pentecostal Oath sets up assumptions about gender performance and identity for the more secular chivalric portions of the narrative, Nacien's prohibition of women reveals key assumptions about gender in the more spiritual context of the Grail quest. While the prohibition does not claim to be anything like a comprehensive guide to Grail questing, its articulation of the standards and aspirations of the Grail quest as well as its prominent position at the beginning of the quest set it apart as a foundational moment. As with the Pentecostal Oath, the premises of the prohibition will sometimes be upheld and sometimes be questioned by the turns of the narrative itself. The Oath carries authority in the chivalric world because it comes from King Arthur; the prohibition's spiritual authority from Nacien the hermit is particularly weighty in the world of the Grail quest because the knights so often need spiritual guidance from hermits and recluses in order to navigate their new identities as "knyghtis of hevynly adventures" (721). Nacien is laying out ground rules for spiritual questing here as the Oath does for chivalric questing.

Also, like the Oath, Nacien's prohibition implicitly contains some weighty and prejudicial assumptions about women. Nacien's instructions characterize women in general as morally suspect and incompatible with the high and holy aims of the quest. As the knights prepare to leave, the whole court is

> trowbled for the love of the departynge of these knyghtes. And many of tho ladyes that loved knyghtes wolde have gone with hir lovis. And so had they done, had nat an olde knyght com amonge them in relygious clothynge and spake all on hyght… (675)

The messenger from Nacien then forbids the knights from bringing women with them on the quest for the Grail and explains the reason for banning women, and the knights accordingly comply with the ban:

> "Fayre lordis whych have sworne in the queste of the Sankgreall: Thus sendith you Nacien the eremyte worde, that none in thys queste lede lady nother jantillwoman with hym, for hit ys nat to do in so hyghe a servyse as they laboure in. For I warne you playne, he that is nat clene of his synnes he shall nat see the mysteryes of Oure Lorde Jesu Chryste." And for thys cause they leffte these ladyes and jantilwomen. (675)

The hermit's message here reads women as emblematic of bodily sin for the male knights and thus an impediment to reaching the holy "mysteryes" of the Grail. The ban makes specific logical connections between women and sin. The causative language here—"for hit ys nat to do," "For I warne you playne," "for this cause,"—is particularly striking because Malory's style is usually so paratactic; the strings of *and*s in Malory's typical idiom leave much guesswork for readers who want to determine how events are related.[22] But here in Nacien's prohibition, causal relationships are explicit. The knights cannot take women with them because "he that is nat clean of his synnes he shall nat see the

[22] See Bonnie Wheeler, "Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The Case of Sir Gawain's Reputation," in *Arthurian Literature* 12 (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, Winter, 1993), 110, and also Michael Twomey, "The Voice of Aurality in the *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 13, no. 4 (2003), 106-7.

mysteries of Oure Lorde Jesu Chryste." The "he" is repeated—it is men who will undertake the quest, and for them, women are equated with sin. In a partial defense of Nacien's tone, it is fair to note that the women who want to go with the knights here are not just any women, but the lovers of the knights; nevertheless, Nacien's message still does not acknowledge the possibility that women could come on the quest, or knights could bring them along, for any purpose other than sinful love. The ban, like the Pentecostal Oath before it, only takes notice of women insofar as they facilitate men's actions and perceives women as signifying elements within a symbolic system of virtue centered on male knights. The ban does not make room for the possible virtues (or even vices, other than sleeping with knights) of the women themselves, but rather sees them as the emblem of bodily sin which the men must flee in order to be holy. According to Nacien's message, by being without women, the male knights take the first step to being without sin.

Nacien's statement displaces the sins of the knights onto the women.[23] The knights have to be clean of their own sins in order to see the mysteries of the Grail, and being clean of their own sins, as the events of the quest will show, is really much more complicated than leaving behind women. The wording of the message, however, allows

[23] This move is not uniquely Arthurian, but consistent with a vast history of Christian misogyny. See, for example, the series of anti-woman tales in the life of St. Arsenius in Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Thomas Graesse (Leipzig: Impensis Librariae Arnoldianae, 1850), 808, translated as Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, rpt. 2012), 378, including this little gem: "Alius etiam frater cum matrem suam vetulam trans fluvium portare deberet, ille manus suas pallio involvit. Cui illa: ad quid operuisti manus tuas, fili? Et ille: corpus mulieris ignis est et ex eo, quod te contingebam, aliarum feminarum memoria in meo animo veniebat." ("Another monk had to carry his aged mother across a river and before doing so wrapped a cloth around his hands. His mother asked him: 'Why have you covered your hands, my son?' The son: 'A woman's body is fire, and when I touched you, it brought to mind the memory of other women!'") The hermit's message is only one of many instances when men have conveniently seen women's bodies, rather than men's own minds, as the source of spiritual harms.

the men undertaking the quest to distance themselves mentally from the *idea* of sin by distancing themselves physically from the *bodies* of women. As Jennifer Looper says, "The participants in this quest…seek to escape 'earthly things' and thus women"[24]—they align women with a sinful, anti-spiritual reality that threatens to keep the knights from elevating themselves toward the high aims of the Grail quest. Though it is more accurately the knights' relations with the women, not the women themselves, that are sinful, the language of the prohibition allows for slippage and then scapegoating. In the new context of the Grail quest, some things have changed: The prohibition far exceeds the material, temporal scope of the Oath by imposing a standard of holiness for knights who aspire to "the mysteryes of Oure Lorde Jesu Chryste" (675) not merely "worship and [the] lordship of Kynge Arthure" (97) as outlined in the Oath. Yet some things have stayed the same: The knights are still defining themselves against women. In the Oath, the knights define themselves as strong and courageous against the weakness of women, while in the prohibition, knights define themselves as holy against the sinfulness of women.

## 1.3 Women in the Grail Quest

After the prohibition, many events in the Grail story confirm the view that women are dangerous to the holiness of men in this spiritual quest and that knights can accordingly be holier by keeping away from women. Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes a

[24] Jennifer E. Looper, "Gender, Genealogy, and the 'Story of the Three Spindles' in the *Queste del Saint Graal*," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 1 (1998): 50. Looper is talking about Malory's French source, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, rather than about the *Morte*, but the *Morte*'s prohibition is similar enough to the *Queste*'s that her insights still apply.

theological framework in which "*woman* or *the feminine* symbolizes the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature, whereas *man* symbolizes the spiritual, or rational, or mental."[25] According to this gendered system of symbols as I apply it to the Grail quest, the men must shun women in order to remain holy, and women are a threat to any knight's ability to qualify for a spiritual quest. Though physical desires (considered sinful on the Grail quest) are common to all of humanity, these desires are symbolically allocated to women so that the knights can imagine themselves as righteous if they manage to reject contact with women. Lancelot, Perceval, and Bors all seem to subscribe to this view, and female figures appear as threats to these knights' holiness and as impediments to their aims of reaching the mysteries of the Grail.

Lancelot sees Guenevere as a hindrance to his own attempts to be holy, just as Nacien would expect; however, Lancelot's problem with Guenevere is not solved by leaving her behind at the court and is not nearly so simple as the sexual temptation of adultery. When Lancelot confesses his sins to a hermit in the Grail quest, he admits "how he had loved a quene unmesurabely" and explains that his love of Guenevere undermines his integrity and his connection with God:

> and all my grete dedis of armys that I have done, for the moste party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit ryght other wronge. And never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wynne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved—and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit. (696)

Lancelot believes that his love of Queen Guenevere has taken his focus away from God and introduced less-than-holy motives for his knightly heroics. Heng reads this

[25] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 262.

confession as a positive expression of Guenevere's large influence, through Lancelot's actions, in the Arthurian world. "In expressly assigning the queen the purpose and uses of his life," Heng argues, "Lancelot subsumes his identity within her own, his volition existing separately only insofar as it is a force for instituting her authority and spatial presence within the world."[26] While I agree that Lancelot is assigning Guenevere's authority to his actions, I also note with some suspicion that he does so only after the fact and that the actions in question are those he now regrets. I read the confession, then, as a moment where Lancelot shifts blame onto Guenevere for his life of seeking worldly acclaim. It is not any adultery with Guenevere that Lancelot confesses here, but his love of glory, a knightly preoccupation which could certainly be explained without reference to Guenevere or any other woman. Lancelot's problem with Guenevere is more complex than sexual temptation; Malory is deliberately dodgy about whether Lancelot and Guenevere have even physically consummated their relationship by this point, and the hermits, recluses, and visions of the Grail quest never specifically rebuke Lancelot for adultery with Guenevere.[27] But in the logic of the Grail quest's spiritual misogyny, Lancelot's vainglory is worldly, and so Lancelot, in his strife to be a spiritual male knight, can shift blame onto a worldly woman to gain distance from the sin.

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[26] Heng, 288.

[27] Though, see page 775 for reference to Lancelot's "foure and twenty yere that he had bene a synner," which could refer to years of adulterous love for Guenevere. See the infamous May Passage (which occurs after the Grail quest) for Malory's dodginess about the nature of Lancelot and Guenevere's affair: "But the olde love was nat so, for men and women coude love togydirs seven yeres, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them; and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes" (842). Shortly after the May Passage, Lancelot rescues Guenevere from Mellyagaunt and "[takes] hys pleasance and hys lykying untyll hit was the dawnyng of the day" (852). This is the one and only time when Malory makes it clear that Lancelot and Guenevere have sex.

Lancelot believes that his success in the Grail Quest is fundamentally limited because of his love of Queen Guenevere. Mahoney says that Lancelot's sin with Guenevere is more serious than sexual temptation: "Idolatry rather than adultery is the issue." The fault is that Lancelot "has seen [Guenevere] as the source of his prowess and must learn that the true source is God."[28] Donald Hoffman similarly sees Lancelot's love for Guenevere as something too all-consuming to make room for the demands of the Grail quest. He compares Galahad's desire for the Grail to Lancelot's desire for Guenevere: "Like Lancelot his father, [Galahad] longs for that which is difficult and dangerous to attain, but that object of distant desire is in Lancelot's case named Guinevere, in Galahad's the Grail."[29] Lancelot cannot follow the Grail quest wholeheartedly because he already follows Guenevere with his soul's full spiritual devotion. Because of the devotion Guenevere inspires, Mary Etta Scott classifies Guenevere as a hindrance to men's spiritual success: "Women like Guenivere mean death of the soul. Hence, though their *intent* is not evil, the effect is to mislead men and prevent them from achieving the spiritual heights they are otherwise capable of."[30] Scott's language reproduces the misogyny of Nacien's prohibition by defining what women "mean" in terms of their unintended effects on men—Lancelot's spiritual ambitions, in this reading, take precedence over Guenevere's own thoughts, choices, and experiences to define Guenevere's spiritual significance. Lancelot himself certainly holds these priorities when he considers his own performance after the Grail quest. He petulantly

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[28] Mahoney, 388. Mahoney also notes that in the *Queste* source text, but *not* in Malory, Guenevere is an agent of the devil deliberately intended to undermine Lancelot's ability to seek the Grail.
[29] Hoffman, 77.
[30] Mary Etta Scott, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Study of Malory's Women," *Mid-Hudson Language Studies* 5 (1982): 26.

blames Guenevere for her unintended effect of hindering his vision. This effect takes place in his own "prevy thoughtis" and is not tied to anything in particular that Guenevere has said or done: "And if that I had nat had my prevy thoughtis to returne to youre love agayne as I do," Lancelot tells Guenevere, "I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever saw my sonne Sir Galahad, other Percivale, other Sir Bors" (791). Lancelot believes that his attachment to Guenevere is what excludes him from the spiritual "mysteryes" the other knights are able to behold. In this case, Lancelot's own assessment of his relationship with Guenevere confirms Nacien's warning that associating with women endangers men's capacity for spiritual victories.

Perceval (the Grail knight second only to Galahad) also encounters a female figure, though one far less complex than Guenevere, as a temptation that endangers his spiritual quest for the Grail and the salvation of his soul. As he journeys alone in search of the Grail, Perceval meets a woman who is secretly the devil incarnate; she claims to be unjustly disinherited, and she invokes Perceval's knightly duty (which he has sworn in the Pentecostal Oath to fulfill) of helping gentlewomen in distress. She knows that he, as one of Arthur's knights, is specifically obligated to help her under these circumstances: "for ye be a felowe of the Rounde Table, wherefore ye ought nat to fayle no jantillwoman which ys disherite and she besought you of helpe" (710). Perceval agrees to help the woman, then feasts in her pavilion and becomes drunk.[31] He swears to serve her, and she consents to have sex with him, but just before they do the deed, Perceval happens to see

[31] We can read this feast as an evil parody of the Grail feast. At the vision of the Grail in Arthur's court, the knights are mystically fed so that "every knyght had such metis and drynkes as he beste loved in thys worlde" (674), while at Perceval's feast with this lady, "he had mervayle, for there was all maner of meetes that he cowde thynke on" (711). At the Grail feast, the knights are intoxicated with a reckless enthusiasm to pursue the quest for a better vision of the Grail; here Perceval is merely intoxicated and gives in to lust after drinking the devil woman's wine.

the cross of his sword and make the sign of the cross, which dissolves the woman's pavilion in smoke and banishes the woman herself. As an expository hermit kindly informs him, she was really "the mayster fyende of helle" all along (712). This (apparent) woman is specifically a sexual temptation for Perceval; oddly enough, the most distressing thing about the encounter for Perceval is not the part where he swears to serve a person who turns out to be the devil, but the part where he almost loses his virginity (711), and it is the masculine sword that saves Perceval from the moral dangers of an effeminate situation. This episode is an emblematic test of Perceval's integrity. The sexual sin, as Edwards argues, stands in for sin in general during the symbolic trials the knights encounter on the Grail quest. As Edwards says, "the power of misogyny" colors the allegory of the knights' temptations—"That is, chastity is a virtue in itself, and a metaphor or allegory of other virtues; women are a vice in themselves and an allegory for other vices."[32] The knights do not encounter temptations to a wide range of vices in the Grail quest; virginity stands in for comprehensive holiness, and in episodes such as this one, women stand in for sin *per se*.

In a similar episode, Bors (Grail knight number three) more successfully rebuffs a devil in female form, and the scene simultaneously confirms Nacien's warning about the spiritual dangers of women and puts a good deal of pressure on Arthurian chivalric ideals. The apparent lady declares that she loves Bors and threatens that she and her twelve gentlewomen will jump from a tower and die if he does not consent to sleep with her (739-40). Bors will not surrender his chastity and prepares to see them all fall to their

[32] Edwards, 43. See also McCracken 131 for an analysis of this scene. McCracken notes that "the knight's desire to keep his virginity is represented as a fragile resolve in episodes that recount attempted seductions by the devil."

deaths. At this moment, when he describes Bors' thought processes, Malory goes into more detail than usual about a character's interior thoughts and feelings.[33] Bors, we are told, feels "grete pité," and yet his primary agendum is to protect his own soul, not the ladies, from harm. As he sees them getting ready to leap from the tower, he is "nat uncounceyled in hymselff that levir he had they all had loste their soules than he hys soule" (740)—he remains resolved, and even though he believes that the gentlewomen could all be damned if they die in this way, he is more concerned that his own soul would be in danger if he consented to sleep with the lady. Strangely (if we think about how knights act in their pre-Grail quests), Bors meditates about the women's souls and his own during the precarious moments before they jump rather than attempting any heroic physical action to prevent the mass suicide.[34] Nor does he doubt that the gentlewomen are humans who will die if they fall. When the lady and her gentlewomen fall, Bors crosses himself, and the scene crumbles into shrieking devils (740), vindicating Bors' choice to look after the blamelessness of his own soul rather than act to protect ladies from harm. In both Perceval's and Bors' temptation stories, devils masquerading as women threaten to turn the knights aside from their holy aims and damn their souls. These episodes confirm the spiritual misogyny of Nacien's ban and affirm that holy men need to stay away from women in order to remain holy.

Furthermore, in both of these temptation stories, we see not only a validation of Nacien's warning (that women endanger knights' holiness) but also serious tensions

[33] But *nota bene* Felicia Nimue Ackerman, "'Every man of worshyp': Emotion and Characterization in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" *Arthuriana* 11, no. 2 (2001): 32, for a discussion of characterization in Malory that de-emphasizes any need for "novelistic descriptions of…inner lives."

[34] See, in contrast, Balin's unsuccessful but apparently genuine attempt to disarm the bereaved lover Columbe so that she does not harm herself (54). If Bors had tried to enter and climb the tower, he might not have made it in time, but removing himself as an audience could have at least stalled the performance.

between the Pentecostal Oath and the spiritual values of the Grail quest. Taking action to aid these ladies is exactly what Perceval and Bors *should* do as good knights according to the Oath, but in Grail Quest Land, they could damn their souls by doing so. Under the Oath, Perceval should absolutely be on the side of a disinherited lady, and Bors should not stand by and let gentlewomen die, whatever the danger to himself. The Oath also makes no particular stipulations against knights accepting sexual rewards from consenting single ladies whom they aid. Indeed, a knight who aids a lady according to his duty prescribed in the Oath often receives the lady's body in bed, and possibly her hand in marriage, as a reward for his successful chivalry.[35]

Perceval's and Bors' encounters with devil women illuminate some of the tensions between Arthurian chivalric ideals and the spiritual ideals of the Grail quest. The Grail quest interrogates many of the weak points of secular Arthurian knighthood—its violence, for example (729). The Oath's general mandate to defend women is another fault line in secular chivalry. As Armstrong observes, such a general statement can easily be exploited and can come into conflict with the mandate not to engage in "wrongful quarrels."[36] This sweeping policy of defending all women is a practical flaw in chivalric idealism; it prescribes behavior for the knights that is likely to get them into trouble sometimes. The Grail quest serves in part to illuminate flaws in the ideals of chivalry, and

[35] For a paradigmatic tale of a knight who wins the lady herself as a reward for providing her with knightly aid, see the "Tale of Sir Gareth" (223-288). Gareth says to the lady whom he has fought to rescue, "I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body" (255). In Gareth's case, he is rebuked not for sleeping with Lyoness *per se,* but for attempting it before the planned wedding (262-63). See also 375, 509, and 525 for further instances where a lady's love is the expected reward for a knight who fights to rescue her. This expectation that knights may get to sleep with the ladies they save is a complicating factor for the *Morte*'s central adulterous couples, Lancelot and Guenevere and Tristan and Isolde, because the knights (not the queens' husbands) do the rescuing but cannot do the consequent bedding without treason.
[36] Armstrong, 32 and 186.

this is part of what happens in the temptations of Perceval and Bors: here, defending women will get them into spiritual trouble. Bors' and Perceval's temptation episodes emphasize that the Oath's prescriptions for knightly behavior are flawed.

However, the Grail quest initially fails to address the converse flaws in the Oath's perception of women. The Quest points out flaws in the Oath's prescriptions for male behavior by getting Oath-following knights into trouble. But sometimes the Noble Tale fails to question the other side of the ladies clause, the part that implicitly defines how women operate in the world, which is also flawed. I suggest that the Noble Tale has such a problem with women initially because, amid all the rigorous questioning of chivalric ideals for knights, the characters fail to question the implicit and complementary chivalric ideals for women. Armstrong says that "in Malory's text, the gap left by the lack of devotion to God is filled in with devotion to the service of ladies...devotion to God is not merely *replaced* by devotion to ladies, but rather *the compulsion to serve ladies precludes devotion to God*."[37] Nacien, then, has reason to give a warning not just because the knights and the women could have sinful relations physically, but also because the women could compete with God for the knights' deepest devotion—as Guenevere does for Lancelot.

I argue that the kind of devotion to ladies which excludes devotion to God stems from a specifically chivalric conception of women. Women who need to be rescued and will then provide rewards to the knights in pleasure, wealth, or undying glory are exactly the women Nacien is worried about. Women whose need for help gives cause for knights

[37] Armstrong, 81; italics original. See also McCracken, 123 for another apt explanation of the way that women and God share the same aspirational function in relation to knights.

to fight and kill one another and whose weakness validates the knights as strong are indeed a serious spiritual problem for knights who should not murder and whose strength should come from God. The social role of women as constructed by the Oath is deeply intertwined with notions of vainglorious worship and violent might that the knights must abandon in order to pursue the Grail. Nacien sees women as incompatible with the impending spiritual quest because women *as perceived by the chivalric world*, as per the oath, absolutely are incompatible with the spiritual quest.

And yet, despite the prohibition's declaration that women are incompatible with the Grail quest, and despite the examples of women who are dangerous to the knights' souls, some women turn out to be essential to the achievement of the Grail quest, and they do so by existing outside of the parameters that chivalric society has set for women. As the Sankgreal story unfolds, the knights need women in order to approach the "mysteryes" they seek: Many of the wise ascetics who advise the searchers are women. Wandering gentlewomen and female recluses, most notably Perceval's aunt, give advice to the travelling Grail knights (692, 699, 716, 720-22, etc).[38] These women give the knights much needed guidance about the new kind of spiritual life they must pursue, and sometimes they also serve as examples for the knights to imitate. It is an enclosed anchoress who interprets Lancelot's confusing allegorical adventures for him, and she instructs him about his own sins and the spiritual nature of the quest (720-22). Women such as this anchoress are spiritual authorities who are able to help because they know

[38] In some ways they are similar to the quest maidens who guide knights in earlier episodes. See Jesmok, *Malory's Women*, 49-50 and following for a discussion of these quest maidens. The female advisors on the Grail quest are somewhat distinct from the quest maidens because we know that they have their own spiritual occupations of prayer and devotion rather than simply waiting around for knights in need of guidance. The recluses are helpful in much the same way as the quest maidens but do not serve to center knighthood in the same way.

more about spiritual life and the demands of the Grail quest than the knights do. Like Nacien the hermit, they help the knights orient themselves to the new and strange demands of the Grail quest.

These women are both instructors and examples for the spiritual life to which the Grail knights aspire. Perceval's aunt, who is living as an ascetic recluse, tells Perceval how she chose to give up her riches. "I well oughte to know you, for I am youre awnte, allthoughe I be in a poore place," she explains, "For some men called me somtyme the Quene of the Wast Landis, and I was called the quene of moste rychesse in the worlde. And hit pleased me never so much, my rychesse as doth my poverté" (699). Because Perceval's aunt's renounces worldly interests for the spiritual vocation of a recluse, Jesmok sees this woman as an exemplary figure in the Grail quest, where "earthly values must be redefined in a heavenly context. Those few knights who can accept and integrate this change achieve some success in the quest; the others fail dismally." Here, "The actions of Perceval's aunt represent the vanguard of the movement from the worldly to the spiritual. She is model as well as guide."[39] The knights who will have any progress in heavenly adventures must imitate Perceval's aunt by leaving worldly pursuits behind—as she leaves behind her wealth, they must leave behind their hunger for worldly glory and power. Critics such as Jesmok have observed the spiritual importance of women who instruct the knights on the Grail quest but have not seen the contradictions these women bring in the context of the Grail quest's pervasive spiritual misogyny.

The text is conflicted about what femininity and women mean for spirituality. Contrary to the suspicions raised in Nacien's initial ban on women, these wise female

[39] Jesmok, *Malory's Women*, 62.

figures have nothing to do with sinful love, but rather provide the knights with necessary practical and spiritual guidance in their quest. Though women are repeatedly coded as symbols of evil who must be shunned on a holy quest, the knights need instruction from these holy women in order to pursue that same quest. These women do not inspire the knights to deeds of violence, they offer no sexual rewards, and they do not compete for devotion owed to God. The knights' reliance on these women to guide them undermines Nacien's message because women were initially forbidden as sinful distractions incompatible with the quest, and yet the knights need instruction from these holy women in order to pursue the quest.

The ban on women does not apply to the holy women because they are not the kind of women constructed by the Oath and still expected in the ban. The spiritual misogyny of the ban is thus intertwined with the chivalric misogyny of the Oath—the women invoked by the Oath and the women invoked by Nacien's ban are the same women, but the prescribed response for knights is different depending on whether the knights are seeking glory or holiness. Knights who seek glory must direct their attentions at chivalric women, rescue them in need, and serve them devotedly. Knights who seek holiness must shun the same chivalric women, they must be wary of both lust and pride that might be gratified in the rewards for rescuing these women, and they must serve only God. The chivalric and the spiritual kinds of misogyny in the *Morte* have different prescriptions for knightly behavior but very similar concepts of how women act in the world and relate to knights. When women do not act according to preconceptions, the Oath and the Ban both come into question.

## 1.4 Perceval's Sister as Spiritual Guide

Perceval's sister presents a formidable challenge to both the spiritual misogyny of the Sankgreal section and the chivalric misogyny of the rest of the *Morte*. She fits neither the Oath's expectation that women need knightly assistance nor the prohibition's expectation that women endanger knightly holiness. Perceval's sister's journey with the knights is a more direct defiance of Nacien's order than their contact with stationary recluses, and it also gives us the opportunity to see the strength and piety of her character in action. Janina Traxler identifies "three normal roles for women" in the Grail quest narrative, the roles of "providing information, tempting the Grail seekers, or needing to be rescued," but claims that Perceval's sister is "unique."[40] The recluses (Perceval's aunt and her ilk) provide information, Bors' and Perceval's devil women tempt the knights, and various maidens who cross the knights' adventuring paths require assistance in similar ways to damsels in distress elsewhere in the text, but often with an allegorical turn. Galahad, for example, saves a castle full of women from seven knights who represent the seven deadly sins (685-86).[41] Bors chooses to abandon his own brother in order to save a woman from being raped (736); however, the episode is not really about the woman's distress but rather about Bors' choice to prioritize virginity over worldly concerns (742).[42] The women who need assistance on the Grail quest are similar to the women in the secular portions who call on the knights to fulfill their oath and provide assistance, but often in

[40] Traxler, 262.
[41] See Scott, 22.
[42] See Catherine Batt, "Malory and Rape," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 3 (1997): 83-84, for a more comprehensive discussion of how the text handles rape. Batt argues that in Malory's treatment, the experiences of women who are victims of rape are "subsumed into the issue of masculine chivalric identity and integrity"—rape in the *Morte* is about men's character and not about women's trauma. See also Mann, 215 for more discussion what is at stake in this episode.

the Grail quest, these women and their distress are also swept into larger spiritual meanings, representing concerns that the male knights have about sin, redemption, and purity. Perceval's sister is also (as I discuss in Chapter 2) loaded with allegorical meaning in the Grail quest, but unlike these other women, she does not follow the chivalric pattern of requiring the knights' aid. Perceval's sister is certainly neither a temptress nor a damsel in distress, nor is she a static source of information. As an intrepid traveler and a spiritual authority, she disrupts the patterns of female behavior already present in the *Morte*.

As I show how Perceval's sister disrupts patterns of feminine behavior established elsewhere in Malory's own text, the *Morte,* I also argue that she goes beyond the boundaries established for her in Malory's source text, the French *Queste del Saint Graal*. I am building here on an article by Ginger Thornton and Krista May, who argue that "by subtly recrafting his source, Malory increases the significance of [Perceval's sister's] role."[43] I agree with this part of their argument, and I examine additional changes in the text that represent Perceval's sister as a more powerful character. I also see even greater significance for the claim that Perceval's sister is made a more powerful character because I am contextualizing her story against the chivalric and spiritual expectations for women voiced elsewhere in the text: These changes from the source text make Perceval's sister not just a more vibrant and complex character in her own right, but also a more direct challenge to the various attempts to limit women's power and participation in both chivalric and spiritual communities in the *Morte*.

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[43] Ginger Thornton and Krista May, "Malory as Feminist? The Role of Percival's Sister in the Grail Quest," in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Reviews*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (New York: AMS, 1992), 43.

In the scene where Perceval's sister first contacts Galahad, Malory's changes to the French text highlight the way that she thwarts chivalric expectations for women. (Thornton and May do not examine this scene.) Perceval's sister's entrance mirrors chivalric expectations only to frustrate them, even more so in Malory than in his source. In Malory's version, Galahad goes to bed at a hermitage, but there is a disturbance when a damsel comes to the door:

> So whan they [the hermit and Galahad] were at rest, there befelle a jantillwoman com and cnokkede at the dore and called Sir Galahad. And so the good man cam to the dore to wete what she wolde. Than she called the ermyte Sir Ulphyne and seyde, "I am a jantillwoman that wolde fayne speke with the knyght which ys within you." Than the good man awaked Sir Galahad and bade hym aryse, and "speke with a jantyllwoman that semyth she hath grete nede of you." (750)

The scene is almost identical in the French *Queste,* but Malory has omitted one line that changes the force of what the hermit says. In the *Queste*, Perceval's sister speaks to the hermit at the door and tells him her purpose: "Sire Ulfin, fete ele, je sui une damoisele qui voil au chevalier parler qui laienz est. Car je ai mout grant besoign de lui" (Sir Ulfin, I want to talk to the knight who is inside. I am in great need of his help).[44] In the French text, then, the hermit is merely repeating what Perceval's sister has already said when he characterizes her as a damsel seeking Galahad's help. Malory, however, omits the damsel's statement that she needs help and instead has Ulphin *assume* that she needs help without being told. The hermit supposes that a damsel looking for a knight so urgently and at such a late hour must be in trouble and must desperately require the knight's assistance. This particular hermit, like many in the *Morte*, is apparently a retired knight—

[44] *La Queste del saint graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1921), 198. *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, trans. E. Jane Burns, in *Lancelot Grail* vol. IV, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1995), 63. Burns' translation is based on Pauphilet's edition.

*Sir* Ulphin—and understandably misreads the situation because he retains the chivalric expectation that women who seek out knights have "grete nede" of help.[45] Martin Shichtman takes the hermit's word for it, reading the scene as one more instance of the same damsel in distress pattern. "The conventional manner in which Percival's sister is brought into the Grail story," says Shichtman, "barely differentiates her from any other gentlewoman seeking knightly aid. She is introduced to Galahad by Sir Ulphyne, the hermit, who calls her 'a jantylwoman that semyth she hath grete nede of you.'"[46] But I would like to emphasize that in Malory's version, the hermit gets it *wrong*—Malory has introduced an assumption on the hermit's part which turns out to be incorrect when Perceval's sister does not request aid for herself but instead acts to help Galahad find his companions.

It initially appears that Perceval's sister is seeking Galahad's assistance, the way that so many women before and during the Grail quest have come to knights looking for help, when in fact she is offering her aid to Galahad. When she is allowed to speak for herself for the first time in Malory's version, she offers to show Galahad the way to the adventure he seeks: "'Sir Galahad,' seyde she, 'I woll that ye arme you and mownte uppon youre horse and sew [follow] me, for I shall shew you within thys thre dayes the hyghest adventure that ever ony knyght saw'" (750). She also offers to show him the high adventure in the French text, and so in both texts, her actions show that she is aiding Galahad more than seeking his aid. Malory's change to Perceval's sister's first scene, however, highlights the failure of the chivalric expectation that a woman character must

[45] See Malory, *Morte*, vol. 2, ed. Field, 637 for Field's note suggesting that this retired knight may be the same Sir Ulphuns from the story of Uther at the beginning of the *Morte*.
[46] Martin B. Shichtman, "Percival's Sister: Genealogy, Virginity, and Blood," *Arthuriana* 9, no. 2 (1999): 15.

need help from a knight. Her line in the French instead validates that expectation, though it is still in some tension with the following events. If in the *Queste* she herself says that she needs help from Galaad, we have no reason to question it. Malory, however, invites such questioning by having the hermit assume such a conventional move for Perceval's sister rather than having her declare it herself, and then by allowing us to see what she actually does for Galahad. Malory plays this scene against the myriad episodes where women approach knights for aid. He makes the hermit assume that the conventional damsel-in-distress plot is underway, and then he lets Perceval's sister reverse the expectations of the ex-chivalric hermit and the well-trained reader by instead *offering aid* to Galahad.

In her first appearance in the text, then, Perceval's sister subverts chivalric expectations about how women function, and she continues to assert considerable independence and authority as she guides Galahad. Because of her nocturnal ride to find Galahad, we can surmise that she is already an adventurous person before she joins the adventures of the Grail knights. Because she offers aid rather than requesting it, she disrupts the expectations the text has set up for women. Galahad, however, seems unfazed and willingly accepts both her authority and her assistance. Unlike Lancelot, Perceval, and Bors, Galahad is not shown to experience sexual temptation in the *Morte*, and though he presumably did take the Pentecostal Oath in Arthur's court at the gathering immediately before his departure for the quest, he has not been trained in years of

chivalric machismo to expect that women require his aid.[47] Galahad immediately accepts the damsel's help and guidance: "So anone Sir Galahad armed hym and toke hys horse, and commended the ermyte to God. And so he bade the jantillwoman to ryde, and he wolde folow there as she lyked." She does ride, "as faste as hir palferey myght bere her," until they arrive "by night" at her lady's castle (750-51).[48] After instructions from Perceval's sister's lady and a brief rest, the two again depart in the dark and ride to a mysterious ship where Bors and Perceval already await them.[49] Thornton and May begin their examination of the changes Malory makes to his French source text at this point. Thornton and May argue that in this scene where Galahad and Perceval's sister join Perceval and Bors on the ship, Malory's alterations to *Queste*'s version make Perceval's sister a more powerful character. In the French text, they observe, Galaad enters the ship trailed by the maiden, but in Malory's version, Galahad and the maiden "enter together." Thornton and May note that in another departure from the French text, "Malory's maiden also takes control of the situation, ordering Galahad to leave his horse behind, symbolically rejecting earthly chivalry." They also note that in the source text, when Galaad gives Perceval's sister credit for bringing him to the ship, his speech comes up as an explanation because Perceval wonders why she is there; Galahad explains her help "unbidden" in Malory.[50] "Sertes," Galahad says, "had nat this jantillwoman bene, I had

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[47] The Grail quest is Galahad's one and only quest. He emerges at the age of fifteen from the convent where he has been raised by nuns and begins the Grail quest with no other chivalric experience. (See 656 for Galahad's age and 666 for his nunnery upbringing.)

[48] They could arrive the same night (and thus the whole ride is nocturnal), or they could have ridden through the intervening day and into the next night. In the *Queste,* it is spelled out that they ride through the remainder of the night and the following day and arrive at the lady's castle the next evening (see *La Queste,* ed. Pauphilet, 198-99; *The Quest,* trans. Burns, 63).

[49] When Galahad asks Perceval and Bors where the ship comes from, "'Trewly,' seyde they, 'ye wot as well as we, but hit com of Goddis grace'" (559).

[50] Thornton and May, 44.

nat come hydir at thys tyme. For as for you two, I wente never to have founde you in thys straunge contreys" (751). Malory's alterations emphasize Perceval's sister's authority and Galahad's need for her help.

Perceval's sister conveys a great deal of arcane information to the knights, yet she is far more than an incidental bearer of spiritual exposition. She becomes even more remarkable as a guide when she and the knights leave the first ship and enter another even more mysterious ship filled with ancient objects, whose histories she is able to explain to the knights. Hoffman, who sees Perceval's sister as a partial Christ figure, minimizes her role in this particular scene: "while Christ preaches," Hoffman says, Perceval's sister "is merely allowed to lecture and explicate the furniture, converting no one and operating only as a passive conduit for divine instruction."[51] I contend that her "lecturing" is not a trivial role—it brings the knights closer to the Grail by connecting them with a spiritual heritage that goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. Further, I contend that Malory's changes to the *Queste* emphasize the personal authority of Perceval's sister and make her far more than a "passive conduit" for information. In both the *Morte* and the *Queste*, Perceval's sister directs the knights to move from the first ship to the second, but Malory omits a line about the knights helping the damsel to cross, again making slight changes to represent Perceval's sister as more capable and independent.[52] When they enter the ship they see, among other baffling objects, a magic sword inscribed with an unreasonable amount of cryptic prophecy. In the *Queste,* the knights talk amongst themselves and ask what the writing means, and Perceval's sister

[51] Hoffman, "Malory's Rejected Masculinities," 73. I do agree with some of Hoffman's other doubts about Perceval's sister's power; see Chapter 2, 82.
[52] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 201; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, 64, cf. Malory, *Morte*, ed. Field, 559.

steps in with an answer to resolve doubts they have expressed; in Malory, she more forcefully begins speaking immediately after they read the prophecy on the sword (755).[53] In the *Queste*, Galaad commends the clarity of her explanation of the sword's history: "de ceste chose nos avez vos bien fait sages" ("you have given us a thorough account of this incident"); in Malory, Galahad commends her wisdom: "ye are right wyse of thes wordes" (756)—this subtle change shifts the focus from the fact that what she *said* was a wise thing to the fact that *she* is a wise person.[54] Galahad, more than his counterpart in the French text, recognizes Perceval's sister as a woman of spiritual authority, not merely an impersonal carrier of accurate information. In the *Queste*, she continues her explanation of the sword in response to a prompting question from Galaad, whereas in the *Morte*, she simply keeps speaking after the compliment. Malory's changes here shift the balance of power and represent Perceval's sister as less deferential to the knights than she is in the source text.

In an even more important change, Perceval's sister gets to tell the story of the ship's mysterious colored spindles in Malory's *Morte*, whereas in the *Queste*, the narrator makes a conscious detour and tells this history in a long aside. After the statement in the *Queste* that the colored spindles are not painted, the narrator intercedes to answer readers' questions: "Or dit li contes dou Saint Graal…" (Now the story of the Holy Grail says…).[55] In Malory, the story is instead told directly by Perceval's sister; the imbedded speech tag makes this attribution clear and not an ambiguous editorial decision: "'The maner of thes spyndyls,' seyde the damesell, 'was: whan synfull Eve cam to gadir

[53] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 203-204; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, 65.
[54] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 209; *The Queste*, trans. Burns, 66. See also Malory, *Morte*, ed. Field, vol. 2, p. 645 for a textual note: "workes" appears instead of "wordes" in some versions.
[55] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 210; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, p. 67.

fruyte…'" (757). Jesmok notes that this speech by Perceval's sister is "the longest sustained narration by any of Malory's characters."[56] This "sustained narration" about abstruse mystical objects places Perceval's sister in a position of unusual authority. Prophetic hermits and decrepit kings elsewhere in the *Morte*'s Grail quest give insights into the history of the Grail, but these are only brief encounters, and none of these old men's stories approaches the scope of Perceval's sister's instruction in holy histories. Roberta Davidson argues that by "using [Perceval's sister] in place of the author's voice in the *Queste del Saint Graal*," Malory alters his source material and "makes her an authority."[57] Perceval's sister is a more impressive source of teaching on the spiritual matters of the ship of faith in the *Morte* than she is in the *Queste* because Malory gives this explanation of the spindles to her.

The change of giving this particular narration to Perceval's sister, a woman of spiritual authority, is particularly appropriate because even in the *Queste*'s version, where Perceval's sister does not narrate it, the tale of the spindles already begins to challenge Christian and Arthurian misogynies. Quinn compares the *Queste* with other rood tree legends (stories of how the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from Eden was preserved) to argue that the *Queste*'s telling gives special emphasis to the role of women in Christian history. In most rood tree legends, says Quinn, it is Adam and Eve's son Seth who retrieves branches or seeds from the Garden of Eden; the *Queste* is the earliest version she finds where Eve is the one who carries the branch. She also notes that the lack of emphasis on Solomon's temple in the *Queste* gives prominence to Solomon's

[56] Jesmok, *Malory's Women*, 60.
[57] Roberta Davidson, "Reading Like a Woman in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 1 (2006): 28.

wife: "In the *Queste* version, even more than in the traditional forms of the rood-tree legend, the woman is given the chief role. Instead of the Temple built at the direction of the king, a ship is built at the direction of his wife."[58] Looper, turning to the story's relationship with the rest of the *Queste*, argues that "The 'story of the three spindles' and the tale of Perceval's sister's redemptive efforts function in the *Queste del Saint Graal* as a locus of resistance to this work's misogynistic program, characterized by the construction of a reformed society from which women are excluded." The *Queste*'s monastic ideals and patriarchal genealogies, Looper argues, work to exclude women from religious history and spiritual community, but the story of the spindles, with its lineage of women—from Eve to Solomon's wife to Perceval's sister—provides an alternate view of redemption through women's actions. In this alternative to "the patrilineal social model represented by Galahad's progress," generations of "women spin a complex signifying web, emphasizing the female agency that creates, perpetuates, and commemorates postlapsarian culture."[59] The story of the spindles in the *Queste*, then, presents a view of redemption in which women contribute to the spiritual health of the existing world through the preservation of culture. Malory's choice to attribute such a story to Perceval's sister in the *Morte* reinforces her role as character who vindicates the spiritual potential of women.

The version of the spindle story told by Perceval's sister in the *Morte* presents the female figures, Eve and Solomon's wife, even more positively than the version in the

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[58] Quinn, 190, 193.

[59] Looper, 49, 55. Looper, 56 and 62, and Quinn, 198, as well as Mahoney 388, and Traxler, 267, also make substantial arguments about the typological relationships among Eve, Solomon's wife, Mary, and Perceval's sister; I am sidelining these very intriguing discussions only because Malory de-emphasizes the complex typological systems found in the *Queste*.

*Queste* does. When Perceval's sister tells the part of the story about Eve, she omits the *Queste*'s meditations on Eve's sin, its dismissals of Eve's intentions, and passages of conventional woman-bashing associated with the expulsion from the Garden. While Perceval's sister retains the epithet "synfull Eve" (757) in her telling, she does not linger, as the source text does, on the familiar details of how sinful Eve was and how much it cost future humanity. She also attributes more positive intention to Eve in the act of keeping the branch from the forbidden tree than the *Queste* does. In the *Queste*, Eve continues holding onto the branch by accident—she plucks the fruit, and the branch happens to come off with it, and it remains in her hand when Adam, too, plucks off fruit. The *Queste* emphasizes repeatedly, both in the garden and afterward, that Eve's acts of plucking and carrying the branch are unintentional. In the *Queste*, Eve then decides, as an afterthought, to try to preserve the branch in memory of the loss of Eden.[60] In the *Morte*, Perceval's sister omits all the remarks about how Eve accidentally plucked and carried the branch: "Then perseyved she that the braunch was freysh and grene, and she remembird her of the losse which cam of the tre. Than she thought to kepe the braunche as longe as she might" (757). In Malory's version, Perceval's sister connects Eve's action of carrying the branch directly with her thought processes of remembering the loss and planning to preserve the branch, thus giving greater force and coherence to Eve's intentions.

Further, Malory's version of the story omits a justification of male sovereignty based on Eve's creation from a rib and also a misogynist question handled in the source text: The *Queste* anticipates that readers may wonder "por quoi li hons ne porta fors de

[60] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 212; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, p. 67.

paradis le raim plus que la fame, car plus est li hons haute chose que la fame" (why the woman and not the man carried the branch out of paradise, since the man is a superior being) and answers such an enquirer by explaining that Eve, as the cause of human destruction, is the one who should carry it because of her typological alignment with the Virgin Mary, the cause of human redemption.[61] This hypothetical question and answer, full of limiting implications about the spiritual status of women, is not present in Malory's version, where there is no suggestion of a need to justify Eve's key role. Perceval's sister omits both misogynist tropes about Eve and asides about Eve's thoughtlessness and instead retains and emphasizes passages about Eve's thought processes and deliberate decisions.

Previous critics of the *Queste* have argued that the Solomon's ship episode brings feminine presence into a male-dominated spiritual landscape, and readers of Malory have noted the change that allows Perceval's sister to tell more of the story; however, previous critics have not recognized the way Perceval's sister adapts the stories of Eve and Solomon's wife. While she does not mount a literary defense of Eve, as Emelia Lanier will do in her sixteenth-century retelling of scriptural history, Perceval's sister presents the story of the spindles in a way that is unusually favorable to Eve in comparison with the source text and contemporary misogyny directed at Eve. It is not just the fact that she gets to tell the story in Malory's version but the *way* that she tells the story that marks Perceval's sister as a disruptive spiritual guide.

In Malory's version, Perceval's sister also presents Solomon's wife more favorably than the *Queste*'s telling does. When the *Queste* introduces Solomon's wife, it

[61] See *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet 212-213; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, p. 67.

lingers on her deceitfulness and falls back on the universalizing expectation that manipulative scheming is what women, in general, have always done:

> Et neporec toz ses granz sens ne pot durer contre le grant engin sa fame, que ele ne le deceust assez souvent, quant ele i vouloit metre peine. Et ce ne doit len pas tenir a merveille; car sanz faille, puis que fame veut metre s'entencion et son cuer en engin, nus sens d'ome mortel ne s'i porroit prendre; si ne començа pas a nos, mes a nostre premiere mere.
>
> (Yet all [Solomon's] wisdom could not withstand the scheming of his wife. She deceived him often, whenever she wanted. And this should surprise no one. For it is well known that as soon as a woman turns her thoughts to deceit, no man's good sense can stop her. This is not new to our time, but dates back to the first mother.)[62]

The *Queste*'s telling makes women's deceit a constant, from Eve to the present day. In Malory's version, Perceval's sister does not generalize the faults of women, but instead actively breaks down such prejudice: "So this Salamon had an evyll wyff," she says, "wherethorow he wente there had be no good woman borne, and therefore he dispysed them in hys bookis" (757). Her explanation—a new addition in Malory—not only cuts out the narrator's justifications of Solomon's misogyny but also highlights the leap Solomon is making from one evil wife to all women ever born.[63] Perceval's sister makes this aside to explain the misogyny of the scriptural books attributed to Solomon in terms of one person's misguided assumptions rather than taking the authority of these books as timeless and universal. In both the *Queste* and the *Morte*, Solomon's wife turns her cleverness to the task of helping Solomon send a message to Galahad, his descendent, in the future, but the wife's role is more authoritative in Malory. In the *Queste*, she advises

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[62] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 220*; The Quest*, trans. Burns, p. 69.

[63] This addition is a particularly noteworthy change because it is an addition, and Malory's general tendency is to shorten his material from *The Queste*. While I do argue that Malory's cuts are organized and that they reshape the character of Perceval's sister, cuts are much easier to dismiss as happenstance than is this line, an original addition that defends the reputation of women against an ancient Biblical slander.

Solomon that he should "Fetes fere une nef" (Have a ship built), whereas in the *Morte*, she says, "I shall lette make a shippe" (758), taking more control of the operation herself. When she gives instructions about making the magical sword, Solomon in the *Queste* follows them with an exception about the magical stones; in the *Morte*, he "ded lat make as she devised" with no exceptions stated (759).[64] The *Queste*'s version includes condemnation when Solomon's wife cuts parts of Eve's ancient tree in order to make the colored spindles to put on the boat; the *Morte* keeps the macabre story of cutting the tree but omits the moral judgments on Solomon's wife.[65]

Malory not only changes the attribution of the story of the spindles by having Perceval's sister—rather than the impersonal "story of the Holy Grail"—tell it, but he also changes the content of the story in ways appropriate to characterizing the new storyteller as a woman of spiritual authority establishing precedents for herself. When Perceval's sister tells the knights the story of Solomon's ship and its contents, she not only exercises authority as a spiritual teacher, but she also presents the stories of Eve and Solomon's wife in a way that disrupts typical misogynist readings of Christian tradition.

As a spiritual authority, Perceval's sister contradicts the notion that women and holy quests do not mix, and she further disrupts The Noble Tale's spiritual misogyny by telling stories that portray women as positive agents in religious history. In contradiction

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[64] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 222; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, p. 70.

[65] In both versions, the carpenters know the origin of the tree and are reluctant to cut into it, and Solomon's wife threatens them with death and makes them do it anyway, though the tree sheds drops of blood when cut. The narrator comments in the *Queste* (but not in the *Morte*) that the threatened carpenters "mielz se voloient meffere ilec que ele les oceist" (preferred to do wrong rather than lose their lives) and that after the blood appears, they continue despite moral misgivings (*La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 224; *The Queste*, trans. Burns 70-71.) The *Morte* retains the carpenters' reluctance and the eerie bleeding, but no one says that Solomon's wife is doing anything evil.

to the prohibition on women at the beginning of the quest, the knights need Perceval's sister as an instructor and guide so that they can understand their place in a larger spiritual history and approach the Grail by the supernatural ships. Malory's changes to his source material highlight the spiritual authority of Perceval's sister and the way that she claims ancient precedents for that authority by narrating redemptive tales of Eve and Solomon's wife. As a spiritual authority, Perceval's sister commands the respect of the Grail knights, contradicts the misogyny underlying Nacien's prohibition, and claims an essential role on the Grail quest as Malory has written it.

The way that Perceval's sister questions patriarchal assumptions and narrates redemptive roles for often-maligned foremothers makes way for her own activity as a woman who counters the spiritual misogyny of the Grail quest in her own life and death. Her role as a spiritual guide for the knights has already gone against both the chivalric and spiritual limitations placed on women elsewhere in the *Morte*. Unlike the vulnerable women constructed by the Pentecostal Oath, Perceval's sister offers help rather than requiring it from Galahad. Unlike the morally suspect women constructed by Nacien's prohibition, she is a wise authority capable of instructing the knights in holy mysteries, not a sexual temptation to distract them from their quest. While she is alive, Perceval's sister guides the Grail knights on their spiritual quest and fundamentally disrupts the *Morte*'s chivalric and spiritual misogyny.

# CHAPTER 2. PERCEVAL'S SISTER *IN MORTE*

## 2.1 The Holy Death of Perceval's Sister

Perceval's sister's holy death, like her holy life, undermines the *Morte*'s chivalric and spiritual misogyny. During her life, she offers help rather than seeking rescue from the Grail knights; similarly at the time of her death, Perceval's sister offers to die for the lady of the castle and refuses to let the knights fight to protect her. By actively choosing to sacrifice herself, she highlights the moral and spiritual failings of the male Grail knights, whose virtue is negative at best—they are virtuous more on account of avoiding sin than doing good. Thus she continues to challenge both the chivalric misogyny that would read women as weak in order to bolster the status of male knights as strong and courageous and the spiritual misogyny that would read women as morally tainted in order to bolster the status of male knights as holy. Finally, Perceval's sister's Eucharistic symbolism at and after her death mounts the most direct challenge to the spiritual misogyny of The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal because it places her at the center of the holy mysteries of the quest with which Nacien says that women are incompatible.

When Perceval's sister comes with the Grail knights to a castle with an evil custom of demanding the medicinal blood of virgins, she chooses to give her own life for

the benefit of the sick lady of the castle, and she refuses to let the knights rescue her.[1] Thornton and May, continuing their analysis of Perceval's sister in light of Malory's changes to the French *Queste*, argue that "Malory's most important change in the character of Percival's sister is to allow her to choose her own fate" at the scene of her death. They make a convincing case that Malory has adapted his source text in order to emphasize Perceval's sister's active and deliberate choice to sacrifice herself. When Galahad, Perceval's sister, Perceval, and Bors approach a castle, the castle's resident knights ask whether Perceval's sister is a virgin in order to find out if they can try to take some of her blood to heal their lady, according to the custom of this castle. "In the French *Queste*," Thornton and May observe, "she is passive throughout the exchange"—Bors answers the knights to tell them that Perceval's sister is a virgin. But Malory has changed the conversation, Thornton and May discover: "Malory's maiden, in contrast, answers the knight's question herself… In both the French *Queste* and the *Morte Darthur*, the knight addresses his question to the men; only in Malory does Percival's sister interject her own response to the query."[2] Thornton and May also observe that Malory adds a new line where Perceval's sister urges the knights to go into the castle on safe conduct despite the personal danger to her. In Malory, but not in the French, Thornton and May reason, Perceval's sister "knows that staying in the bloodletting castle—safe-conduct or not—directly threatens her safety." In the *Queste*, Thornton and May continue, the prophecy about the lady's healing specifically mentions that the healing blood should come from "a

[1] See Charles Ross, *The Custom of the Castle: From Malory to Macbeth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) on evil-customed castles. Ross does not examine the particular castle custom for which Perceval's sister dies but does provide important historical perspective on the trope's roots in common law controversy and its implications about how communities determine what is lawful and what is right through social custom.
[2] Thornton and May, 45-46.

maiden who was a virgin…or even better, the daughter of a king and queen, and sister of Percival the chaste," whereas Malory's version of the prophecy stipulates a virgin princess but does not mention Perceval's sister in particular as the French text does. "By removing the prophecy that Percival's sister is fated to bleed for the dying woman," Thornton and May argue, "Malory makes it possible for her to choose her death rather than to have it forced upon her." They also notice that in the French *Queste*, Perceval's sister requests permission from the knights to comply with the custom of the castle; in Malory, she instead declares that she will do it, having already made up her mind.[3] Thornton and May make a solid argument that Malory's changes work to give Perceval's sister more choice about dying to heal the lady.

The way that Perceval's sister chooses to die, I argue, is particularly important in the larger context of the *Morte* because it disrupts the Pentecostal Oath's expectations about women. Her choice to die and heal the lady preempts the knights' ability to affirm their knighthood by rescuing a damsel as per the Oath. They are required as Arthur's knights "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes sucour" (97). They have sworn this oath every year at Pentecost—presumably including the feast of Pentecost immediately before their departure for the Grail quest. And here is a damsel, Perceval's sister, whose life is menaced by armed knights. The first knight they meet from the castle grabs her horse "by the brydyll" and threatens her: "ye shall nat ascape me tofore ye have yolden the custum of thys castell" (765). This would seem the perfect occasion for the good knights to fight and save Perceval's sister. And at first they do

[3] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 239-240; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, 75; Thornton and May, "Malory as Feminist?" 46-48.

argue the injustice of the demand, and they fight fiercely to protect her (766).[4] But when they stay in the castle for the night, Perceval's sister for the first time hears the *reason* for the custom—that the blood of a virgin princess will heal the lady of the castle—and she immediately agrees to give her blood. This means that the battle will not recommence the next day as planned, and the Grail knights will not be able to save her from harm. The castle knights are pleased that there will be no battle, but the Grail knights are ambivalent: "And than there was made grete joy…for ellis there had bene mortall warre uppon the morne; natwithstondynge she wolde none other, whether they wolde or nolde" (572). Though the Grail knights want to fight to save her, Perceval's sister makes a choice to help the gentlewoman and refuses to let the knights rescue her.

By pledging to shed her blood for the sick woman of the castle, Perceval's sister usurps the knightly role of doing succor to a lady. As soon as she hears about the lady's plight, she declares her intent to help and maintains that intent despite Galahad's fears for her safety (767).[5] Maureen Fries emphasizes that Perceval's sister makes a "free choice to suffer and die" above the objections of her male companions, who believe that the custom is evil and she should not comply with it.[6] Lisa Robeson notes that Perceval's sister "uses the word worship twice" when she declares her intent to bleed for the lady, thus claiming a kind of honor through bloodshed normally reserved for knights in

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[4] In a charming deviation from the source text, Malory has his three extremely confident Grail knights ask the sixty castle knights to spare themselves by giving up. In the *Queste*, the sixty knights more predictably make this offer to the three, *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 238; *The Queste*, trans. Burns, 75.

[5] For discussions on the nature of the lady's illness, see Maureen Fries, "Gender and the Grail," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 1 (1998): 76, who argues that the lady's disease is specifically leprosy, which signifies guilt and is sometimes believed to be treatable by the blood of innocents; see also Susan E. Murray, "Women and Castles in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory," *Arthuriana* 13, no. 1 (2003): 31, who argues that the disease is a gynecological ailment believed to have psychological and spiritual implications. See Bynum, 199 for a discussion of medieval women's illness and spirituality.

[6] Fries, 76-7.

combat.[7] There are, I think, some serious limitations to the comparison between Perceval's sister's choice to bleed and a male knight's choice to enter combat: The knight is an active combatant doing his best *not* to lose blood, while Perceval's sister submits to being mortally wounded without giving blows in exchange or making any attempt to protect herself; the knight wins glory by exerting physical power, while the woman here wins glory by surrendering it. She claims the vulnerability, not the potency, of a knight in combat, which is hardly a proto-feminist power play. Still, her courage is undeniable, and in this episode it is she, not the male knights, who best fulfills the Oath's behest to aid ladies. Perceval's sister disturbs the Oath's expectations about gendered behavior by refusing to be rescued and by giving her life to save an endangered woman, as male knights are expected to do.

By giving her life on behalf of an undeserving other, Perceval's sister imitates Christ in a way that none of the male Grail knights does. Though no character in the *Morte* comes anywhere near a perfect imitation of Christ, imperfect and symbolic alignments still deserve critical attention. Perceval's sister is a human woman who necessarily falls short of Christ's divinity and Christ's salvific power—as shown in the troubling plot twist that the gentlewoman of the castle is not redeemed from death in the long run but dies soon after her would-be savior (769).[8] Yet in a text where women persistently symbolize bodily sin and appear as incarnations of the devil, it matters that Perceval's sister is even partially a character who manifests the qualities and redemptive

[7] Robeson, 115.

[8] On the destruction of the evil-customed castle and its inhabitants, see Looper, who argues that "it is the community, not Perceval's sister, that is flawed" (60). While the fact that Perceval's sister's death brings no lasting redemption is not remotely her fault, it does illustrate the futility and incompleteness of any merely human character's ability to be Christ in the Grail quest.

actions of Christ. The fact that she is a Christlike female figure at the center of the Grail quest brings particular tension to a story in which women are excluded from the quest as detrimental to holiness in the first place.

Some, however, have argued that Perceval's sister's self-sacrifice only makes her one more subordinated woman used and possessed by men. Shichtman claims that Perceval's sister "is, like many women in Arthurian romance, trafficked for the profit of her kinsmen."[9] Shichtman reads Perceval's sister's connection to Galahad—confirmed in their chaste but marriage-like exchange of loyalties when she girds him with the sword (761)—as an exchange that benefits her male relatives.[10] He also reads her death at the ill-customed castle as "a symbolic marriage and deflowering" in which she is given to the lady of the castle and her family "profits." Shichtman claims that even though she remains a virgin and is not exchanged in marriage like other women, "Percival's sister is partitioned among her various suitors: Galahad receives her hair for his belt; the lady of the castle receives her blood as an ointment." He critiques the reading of Perceval's sister as a saint-like figure whose "body parts are valued as relics" because "this reading obscures the manner in which women's bodies function as raw materials in a sexual economy." Shichtman concludes that "Percival's sister is trafficked, sold, little more than an automobile brought by thieves to a chop shop, worth more in her pieces than she was as a whole."[11] According to Shichtman, Perceval's sister ultimately sacrifices herself for the patriarchy, and it is her male relatives who benefit from her saintly actions and her death.

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[9] Shichtman, 14.
[10] Shichtman, 15-17.
[11] Shichtman, 18-19. See also Traxler, 273 on Perceval's sister's sainthood and its discontents.

I disagree. This pattern of women being exchanged or sacrificed for the benefit of their male relatives certainly exists in the *Morte*—Igrayne and Guenevere are exchanged in this way—but I am not convinced that Perceval's sister fits the pattern. Perceval, along with the other Grail knights, certainly benefits from his sister's guidance and instruction while she is alive, but her guidance is a not sacrifice on his behalf, and her death is of little benefit to her male kin. She does not guide the knights in a self-abnegating way: On the contrary, she asserts authority and wields her vast knowledge with confidence. Neither the narrator nor Perceval's sister indicates that her motive on the quest is to advance Perceval's or her family's interests. The most we hear about her own motives is when she tells the knights about her hair, which she has cut off to make the girdle for Galahad's sword: "the grettist parte of thys gurdyll was made of my hayre," Perceval's sister explains, "whych somme tyme I loved well, whyle that I was a woman of the worlde" (760). From this we learn that she, like her aunt, is a former royal woman who has renounced worldly life to pursue a holy vocation—and there is no indication that she made this spiritual sacrifice for the benefit of Perceval or any other male relative. Indeed, as Bynum shows, male relatives in the hagiographic tradition are not typically pleased with a kinswoman's turn to asceticism.[12] Perceval's sister tells the knights that she cut off her hair "as sone as I wyste that thys adventure was ordayned me" (760). Though Galahad will carry the girdle, Perceval's sister claims ownership of the *adventure* for herself. It is ordained for her. The Grail quest is Perceval's sister's own spiritual endeavor, and her presence on it is not a sacrifice on Perceval's behalf.

[12] Bynum, 221-3, etc.

Shichtman argues that Perceval benefits from the quasi-courtly exchange of devotion between his sister and Galahad but is unclear about how he benefits. I note that Perceval is already, with Bors, set apart from the rest of Arthur's knights as a special companion in the Grail quest, and he does not need his sister's alliance with Galahad to secure this status. We need only look at Bors, who has no sister to exchange with Galahad and yet sees the visions at Corbenic and Sarras, to see how little difference Perceval's sister makes to his standing as Galahad's companion. Bors, it is true, does not die in Sarras with Galahad as Perceval does, but Bors' non-virginal status (724, 728, 627) readily explains this difference. It is the explanation actually given by the text for the difference in holy status between Perceval and Bors, and it makes more sense thematically than a marriage exchange does in the context of the Grail quest's obsession with virginity. So before the ill-customed castle, Perceval's sister is beneficial to the knights as a guide, but the benefit does not favor her kinsman Perceval over the others and is not a result of exchange or sacrifice.

At the castle, she does indeed sacrifice herself, but she views the lady of the castle as the beneficiary, and the knights gain very little from the episode. They (against their will) get out of fighting the hordes of castle knights, but they would not have had to fight in the first place if Perceval's sister had not been in their company. More importantly, Perceval's sister only chooses to die when she learns that the gentlewoman needs help: If saving her companions from a fight were her primary motive, she could have given herself up to the custom prior to or during the furious day of fighting that occurs before the company enters the castle and learns of the lady's plight (see 765-66). She does, as Shichtman notes, say that her death will bring "worship to my lynayge"—which indeed

could mean "honor to (male) relatives." However, this "worship" is only one of the five different reasons that she gives for her choice when she is trying to convince her companions to let her bleed, and three other reasons come before it. It is worth looking at Perceval's sister's own words in full as she declares her intent to help the gentlewoman and maintains that intent despite Galahad's objection:

> "Now," seyde Sir Percivallis sister, "fayre knyghtes, I se well that [1a] *this jantillwoman ys but dede withoute helpe*, and therefore lette me blede." "Sertes," seyde Sir Galahad, "and ye blede so muche ye mon dye." "Truly," seyde she,"[1b] and I dye *for the helth of her,* [2] *I shall gete me grete worship* [3] and *soule helthe,* [4] and *worship to my lynage*; [5] and *better ys one harme than twayne*. [5b] And therefore *there shall no more batayle be*, but to-morne I shall yelde you youre custom of this castell." (767, italics and numbering added)

Her first reason for agreeing to bleed, repeated twice, is the wellbeing of the gentlewoman. Next she sees two benefits, "grete worship and soule helthe" for *herself,* and only then does she mention anything possibly profitable for Perceval or other kin—the "worship to [her] lynayge" and the avoidance of another battle, also repeated twice ("better ys one harme than twayne… there shall no more batayle be") (767). Her speech prioritizes the benefits of her death to women—the sick gentlewoman and herself—over the possible benefits to men, which she may only be mentioning strategically in order to keep the men from interfering with her intent. In the French *Queste*, Perceval's sister speaks of her compliance with the custom as aid to the castle knights and compliance with their wishes, while in the *Morte*, she only refers to sick the gentlewoman, herself, and (to prevent their interference) her own companions—thus Malory makes this

exchange about one woman's choice to aid another rather than about a woman exchanged between two groups of men for their mutual benefit.[13]

Furthermore, the male Grail knights do not see the avoidance of another day of battle as a benefit to them at the time. As I have argued above, the knights lose their conventional source of honor in saving ladies when they allow a woman in their care to suffer harm; they resist Perceval's sister's intentions for as long as they can. They do not believe that they are gaining worship here. Rather, they are deprived of the opportunity to fulfill their oath and fight in the defense of a damsel. This is not a scene in which the knights get to be heroes who enhance their renown. Perceval's sister, rather, is the hero of this scene, and she dies not for the benefit of men, but for the sick gentlewoman and for the perfection of her own soul. While I acknowledge that Perceval's sister spends most of her time in the *Morte* assisting men, I maintain that she is not a passive object of exchange, but a character who makes her own choices and pursues her own spiritual aims.

Perceval's sister disrupts not only the Oath's chivalric expectation that women must be rescued by knights, but also the spiritual misogyny of Nacien's prohibition: She dies in a Christlike way, becoming closer to the mysteries of Christ than any of the male Grail seekers. Her willing choice to give her blood for the restoration of the sick lady of the castle mirrors the free choice of Christ, who says in John's gospel, "nemo tollit eam a me sed ego pono eam a me ipso" (No man taketh it [my life] away from me: but I lay it

[13] *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, 240; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, 75-76.

down of myself).[14] Many have observed that Perceval's sister is—like Galahad or even more than Galahad—a Christ figure. Hoffman argues that she "presents the only character in all of Malory who comes near to achieving an *imitatio Christi*," the scripturally prescribed imitation of Christ. Hoffman claims that Perceval's sister functions in the text to provide critique of the many male characters' failures to embody Christlike qualities; her presence serves to "question the very possibility of the *imitatio Christi* within a masculine, chivalric context."[15] Especially in light of Nacien's and the knights' expectations that women will take them farther away from the "mysteryes of Oure Lorde Jesu Cryste" (675), a female Christ figure is indeed a serious indictment of the knights' spiritual failings. Looper notes that Perceval's sister disrupts gendered expectations because she "is a personage who at first doubles as a Mary-like 'helpmeet' and then destabilizes her inherited gendered typology by functioning just as well as a new Jesus, filling a new Grail with her blood."[16] Instead of remaining at the margins as a helper, Perceval's sister takes a Christlike role that we might expect to be Galahad's prerogative. Yet Galahad, though he is similarly sinless and does also choose when to die (785, 788), does not die on behalf of anyone else in such a close imitation of Christ as Perceval's sister does. The fact that she is a Christlike female figure at the center of the Grail quest brings particular tension to the text because women are excluded from the

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[14] John 10:18, *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatem Versionem*, 5th ed., ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007); trans. Douay Rheims Version. All subsequent biblical references are to the same edition and same translation. See also John 15:13.

[15] Hoffman, 73 and 78. See also Fries, 76. Fries builds on Mann's argument (Mann, 208) that chivalric literature aligns knights' bloodshed with Christ's suffering. Fries argues that Perceval's sister appropriates this chivalric-Christological interpretation of violence, but in a limited way that ultimately "serve[s] the patriarchy." See also Scott, 21.

[16] Looper, 62. See also Quinn, 204. Note that both Looper and Quinn are writing about the *Queste*, but the *Morte* is similar enough on the point of Perceval's sister's death that their insights still apply.

spiritual quest as detrimental to holiness in the first place by Nacien's prohibition. The manner of her death acts as a critique both to the failings of the male knights and to the secular and spiritual misogyny that would marginalize women in The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal. Perceval's sister's freely chosen, Christlike death stands in tension with the *Morte*'s expectations elsewhere—both that women should be passive objects of rescue and that they are incompatible with the elevated spiritual aspirations of the Grail quest.

## 2.2 Perceval's Sister as Eucharistic Symbol

Perceval's sister further confirms her position at the center of the Grail quest by becoming a symbol of the quest's central holy mystery—which is, I argue, the Eucharist itself. Some scholars have acknowledged Perceval's sister as a Christ figure, but her close association with the Eucharist has gone unrecognized. Because she functions as a Eucharistic symbol, Perceval's sister aligns more closely than any other character with the Holy Grail, thus challenging the spiritual misogyny of the Grail quest story and complicating its related religious asceticism.

The central holy mystery of the Grail quest is the mystery of God first becoming incarnate in the flesh and blood of Jesus and then becoming edible and potable in bread and wine of the Eucharist. Bynum, explaining medieval religious valences of food, contends that "Because Jesus had fed the faithful not merely as servant and waiter, preparer and multiplier of loaves and fishes, but as the very bread and wine itself, *to eat* was a powerful verb." She describes eating the Eucharist specifically as "a kind of audacious deification, a becoming of the flesh that, in its agony, fed and saved the

world."[17] The Eucharist—with shocking boldness, as Bynum recognizes—claims a direct connection between God and the *bodies* of believers. This connection is literally a visceral one in which communicants digest God. The Grail is deeply involved with this Eucharistic mystery because it contains Christ's blood (643), because it repeatedly appears as a vessel being used in the Mass, and because it is during such a Mass that Galahad has his climactic vision at the end of the quest (773-4, 782-83, 787).[18] Hoffman perhaps loses sight of the Eucharistic import of the Grail when he describes Galahad's devotion as "detached and metallic like the object upon which he bestows it" and "less sublimated than anemic."[19] The Grail, however, is not cold and inorganic; it is filled with blood (643). Even when it does not contain the blood of Christ directly received from Christ's wounds at the cross, it over and over again contains Eucharistic elements which become Christ's blood and body when consecrated in the Mass. Neither is the Grail detached. Though its appearances may seem capricious, when it does appear, the Grail becomes intimately and bountifully involved in the lives of those who encounter it. The Grail heals those who suffer, and it and blesses its beholders with feasts of real and

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[17] Bynum, 3. But see also Ann Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 15, 161 on some of the limitations of Bynum's reading of the Eucharist.

[18] Jesus in one of these Grail Masses says that the Grail is "the holy dysshe wherein I ete the lambe on Estir Day" (783). This refers to the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist, but it is slightly ambiguous as a Eucharistic reference because the Last Supper occurred at Passover, not Easter, and because it is lamb, not bread or wine, in the Grail. Lamb would have been eaten at the Passover Last Supper and is also typologically aligned with the dying body of Christ, which is the Eucharistic bread. But Malory does not directly state that the Grail contains the Eucharistic elements, bread or wine, on the night of the Last Supper—though it must when it is used as a Eucharistic vessel in the *Morte*. During this Grail Mass at 783, it contains bread.

[19] Hoffman, 77. See also Malo, 109, who diminishes the Eucharistic function of the grail, claiming that Malory actually shows the Grail "more as a relic than as a Eucharistic vessel." Malo notes but mostly dismisses similarities between the Grail and Perceval's sister. Her central argument about Malory's Grail quest is that Lancelot's story critiques relic discourse because Lancelot does everything right as a penitent, but the relic does nothing for him (117). Malo makes a convincing argument that the Grail is presented as a relic; however, I do not think this reading rules out considering the Grail's significance as a Eucharistic symbol at the same time.

delicious food. Whether Galahad himself takes this corporal and materially beneficial presence into account before the end is another question, but any anemia in his devotion does not reflect the nature of its object, the blood-bearing Grail.

Even beyond the times when it is directly used in the mass, the Grail continually extends the Eucharistic premises of healing and mystically feeding devotees. Healing is a Eucharistic premise because consuming Christ's flesh and blood is ultimately meant to lead the faithful into eternal life, and a renewal of temporal life inscribes this process in miniature. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "qui manducat meam carnem, et bibit meum sanguinem, habet vitam aeternam: et ego resuscitabo eum in novissimo die" (He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath everlasting life, and I myself will raise him up in the last day).[20] Resurrection is central to the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, both in the anagogical sense of the Eucharist as a prefiguration of the heavenly feast and in the belief that the Eucharist literally and presently allows communicants to partake of the life, death, and renewed life of God.

It makes sense, then that the Grail as an emblem of the Eucharist would produce miracles of healing. These smaller restorations of life figure the regenerative effects of the Eucharist as the means to eternal life, both present and eschatological.[21] The Grail, accordingly, provides healing to those who encounter it. When Perceval and Ector have accidentally fought one another and are both bleeding to death, too weak and battered to go for help, the Grail appears and heals them both "as hole of hyde and lymme as ever they were in theire lyff" (643). After his long mental illness in the Tristram section,

[20] John 6:55.
[21] See Astell, 54-57 for a much more subtle discussion of the restorative and other functions of the Eucharist than I am able to attempt here.

Lancelot is "heled and recoverde" when he is shown the Grail (650). Later, during the Grail quest, Lancelot observes a sick knight on a litter who kisses the Grail and becomes well again (693-94). Such miracles of healing are appropriate to the Eucharistic and life-giving nature of the Grail.

The Grail's miracles of feeding also reflect the Eucharist's function as food that is both spiritual and physical. In the same Eucharistic discourse from the Gospel of John quoted above, which occurs immediately after the miracle of feeding the five thousand, Jesus describes himself as the bread that will feed the faithful. Just as sustaining manna from heaven fed the Israelites in their desert wanderings, he says, "ego sum panis vitae qui veniet ad me non esuriet" (I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger).[22] The Grail, as an emblem of the Eucharist, characteristically performs miracles of feeding. At the Grail's first appearance in Arthur's court, it mystically provides a delectable feast: "there was all the halle fulfylled with good odoures, and every knyght had such metis and drynkes as he beste loved in thys worlde" (674). Though it is elusive and mysterious in this vision, the Grail shows something of its true nature by providing an abundant meal—each knight receives what "he best loved in thys worlde" as a Eucharistic prefiguration of the heavenly banquet. When the tyrannous king of Sarras imprisons the Grail knights, they are not hungry in prison because "Our Lorde sente them the Sankgreall, throrow whos grace they were allwey fullfylled whyle they were in preson" (786).[23] The Grail sustains the faithful. These miracles of healing and feeding

[22] John 6:35.
[23] For additional miraculous Grail feasts, see also 622, 626, and 776.

performed by the Grail reflect the significance of the Eucharist by restoring and nourishing human life.

Perceval's sister, like the Grail, performs these same Eucharistic miracles of healing and feeding—she secures her place at the center of the spiritual quest by reflecting not only Christ, but also the Eucharistic mysteries embodied by the Holy Grail. Though many have noted the Christlike qualities of Perceval's sister, especially in her death, her connection to the Eucharist has not yet been understood. She does not only die like Christ, but she specifically offers her blood for the regeneration of another. As in the Eucharist, it is the transference of blood which brings death to the giver and life to the recipient. Thornton and May, missing the uniquely Eucharistic quality of the blood healing incident, read the episode as a connection to Galahad in which "by giving her cup of blood to heal the lady of the castle, Percival's sister parallels Galahad's miracle of healing, a miracle no other member of the quest can perform."[24] However, Perceval's sister's blood healing miracle is fundamentally different from Galahad's (and the many others scattered through the *Morte*) in that she uses her *own* blood to heal. Galahad uses *Christ*'s blood, from the spear that pierced Christ's side, to heal the maimed king (784). Galahad is able to handle Christ's blood in a unique way, certainly, but Perceval's sister has healing blood like Christ's in her own body, paralleling the Grail and the Eucharistic chalice. In his blood healing episode, Galahad is metaphorically able to administer the material of the Eucharist like a priest acting as celebrant—Perceval's sister metaphorically *is* the material of the Eucharist. While neither Perceval's sister nor Galahad nor any other character in the *Morte* can presume to be Christ, nevertheless

[24] Thornton and May, 49.

some come into closer symbolic alignment with Christ than others. The way in which Perceval's sister offers her own blood parallels Christ's "hic est enim sanguis meus" ("this is my blood") at the institution of the Eucharist far more than Galahad's blood healing miracle does.[25] Furthermore, because it is specifically her own blood which has the power to renew life, Perceval's sister parallels not just Christ but also the Grail itself, the healing and bloodstained Eucharistic vessel which is the object of the quest.

Perceval's sister, like the Grail, also performs a posthumous miracle of feeding when she provides a Eucharistic feast for Lancelot. As she is dying from loss of blood, Perceval's sister gives instructions for the Grail knights to place her body on a rudderless boat which will drift to meet the knights in Sarras, and Perceval also places in her hand "a lettir of all that she had holpe them as in strange aventures" (768). Lancelot later receives directions in a vision and comes onto the boat with the corpse of Perceval's sister. He sees the corpse, he reads the Grail adventures, and he stays on the boat "with thys jantillwoman" for "a moneth and more" (770).[26] Her body is incorrupt, which in itself is a likely indication of sainthood.[27] Malory makes this sign of Perceval's sister's holiness more striking than it is in the *Queste* because he omits a scene where the body is embalmed before it is put on the boat; embalming explains the preservation of the corpse by non-miraculous means in the *Queste*, but in Malory we are left to conjecture that the

[25] Matt. 26:28.
[26] Traxler, 262, sees these wanderings on the boat as a parallel to the Grail: "Ironically, in a story that contains a prodigious number of people who should have been dead for centuries, she dies young and becomes the most mobile corpse in the story! Only the Grail seems to wander farther and more mysteriously than she does."
[27] See de Voragine, trans. Ryan, 260, 327, 652, and 698 for just a few of the countless examples in hagiographic literature of saints' bodies remaining incorrupt. See Kraemer 7 and 31 for arguments establishing the relevance of hagiographic genre conventions for Malory and his readers.

corpse's incorruption may be a miraculous sign of sainthood.[28] The corpse is not only incorrupt like a saint's corpse but is also, like the Grail, miraculously nourishing. In the presence of Perceval's sister's body, God feeds Lancelot with mystical sustenance: "If ye wold aske how he lyved, for He that fedde the peple of Israel with manna in deserte, so was he fedde; for every day, whan he had seyde hys prayers, he was susteyned with the grace of the Holy Goste" (770). The body of Perceval's sister, like the Grail itself, provides a mystical feast by God's grace.

The mention of manna is another indication that we are meant to think of the Eucharist in this scene. In the above mentioned discourse on Jesus' death and the Eucharist in the Gospel of John, the manna eaten in the desert by the wandering Israelites is typologically aligned with the "panem de caelo" ("bread from heaven") which is Jesus' body.[29] Perceval's sister's body is also a source of divine manna for Lancelot. Bynum argues that medieval holy women identified with God particularly through God's Eucharistic existence as food, that in saints' lives, "women became the macerated body of the Savior, the bleeding meat they often saw in Eucharistic visions." She accordingly sees a pattern of feeding miracles centered around women's corpses, so that "Holy women continued to feed others miraculously from beyond the grave."[30] Perceval's sister is doing exactly this: her corpse provides Lancelot with sustaining Eucharistic manna in a feeding miracle like those performed by women saints and by the Holy Grail.

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[28] For the embalming scene, see *La Queste*, ed. Pauphilet, p. 242; *The Quest*, trans. Burns, 76.
[29] John 6:35.
[30] Bynum, 114 and 123. See also 77 for miracles of saints surviving on the Eucharist alone (which may be, metaphorically, what Lancelot is doing here); 81 for female Eucharistic celebrants seen in art (which may be, metaphorically, what Perceval's sister is doing here); and 145 and 170 for more on women's feeding miracles.

Perceval's sister's deep connection to the Eucharistic significance of the Grail directly contradicts any teaching about women that would relegate them to the margins of the spiritual quest: She belongs at its center with the Holy Grail. Like the Grail, she performs Eucharistic miracles of healing and feeding. If we read her death scene together with the episode on the boat, Perceval's sister provides both elements of the Eucharist—the wine from her blood and the bread from her body. She is aligned not just with Christ but specifically with Christ's Eucharistic existence in blood that is wine and flesh that is bread, given to heal and nourish others. This means that in many ways she also imitates the *Morte*'s central Eucharistic symbol, the Grail. Her status as a symbol of the Eucharist and of the Grail dismantles Nacien's assumptions about women: she is right at the heart of the spiritual "mysteryes" with which women are, according to the ban, incompatible.

The male knights' attempts at sanctity through purity sometimes seem arbitrary and negative—we know that the knights are virtuous because of the evil that they refuse to do more than because of any good that they positively attempt—but Perceval's sister becomes a figure of the Eucharist by making an active choice to help another person. The male knights feel the numinous attraction of the Grail and desire it in an abstract sense, but Perceval's sister understands the Grail *both* mystically and morally. The knights are the ones who finish the quest by reaching the geographical home of the Grail in Sarras, but Perceval's sister *becomes* the Grail by Christlike action and Eucharistic symbolism. While Perceval's sister has been recognized as a saintly and Christlike figure before, she has not been recognized as a symbol of the Eucharist, and it is her Eucharistic symbolism which most forcefully disrupts the pervasive spiritual misogyny of the Grail quest.

Perceval's sister's Eucharistic function is especially important in the context of Malory's Grail quest both because it challenges the text's spiritual misogyny and because it brings together physical and spiritual things, complicating the ascetic ideal associated with sanctity on the Grail quest. This union of spiritual and physical is a fundamental difficulty of the whole quest. Bodily sin keeps some knights from achieving spiritual vision, and some of the religious figures on the quest do advise the knights to fasting and mortification (716, 731). And yet, the Grail in its Eucharistic sense is not primarily about detachment from human flesh and blood but about ingesting divine flesh and blood. Though initially the knights associate women with physicality and physicality with sin, not only do they need women to guide them as they search for the Grail, but they also need bodies to experience the Grail in its full glory by partaking of a Grail Eucharist. It is Galahad, and not Perceval's sister, who receives the sacramental vision in Sarras at the culmination of the Grail Quest and who begins "to tremble ryght harde whan the dedly fleysh began to beholde the spirituall thynges" (787). Yet Perceval's sister, because her death emulates Christ's and because her physical blood is given in a spiritual act of charity, has already experienced this sacramental fusion of "the dedly fleysh" and "the spirituall thynges." In the Eucharist, the act of eating, which is the fundamental basis of having and maintaining "dedly fleysh," becomes one of the most "spirituall thynges" a

person can possibly do.[31] Perceval's sister, in her death, manifests the same mysterious synthesis of flesh and spirit. Her act is grounded in material reality—she allows the blood which is keeping her body alive to be physically removed from it. And yet it is also a deeply spiritual act, both as a decision made in charity by a godly person, and as a typological parallel to the Eucharist. Though "dedly fleysh" and "spirituall thynges" are often at odds in the quest, Perceval's sister brings them together. In this, she challenges the Grail quest's spiritual suspicion of bodies *per se* as well as of women, and she strikes at the heart of The Noble Tale's spiritual misogyny.

Perceval's sister challenges both the chivalric misogyny of the Oath and the spiritual misogyny of Nacien's prohibition—she does not allow the male knights to define themselves against her either by seeing her female body as vulnerable, to be rescued by strong knights, or as sinful, to be shunned by holy knights. When she refuses to be rescued by the knights, she denies them the ability to define themselves against her in the Oath's terms. When she enacts the holy mysteries of the Grail, she denies them the ability to define themselves against her in Nacien's terms. Thus, though she does not overtly break social rules, as Morgan le Fey and Queen Guenevere do, her actions fundamentally disrupt the patriarchal structures by which men define their own virtues in terms of subordinated women.

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[31] See Bynum, 246, on gender and attitudes toward the body and spiritual experience. She claims that "The goal of religious women was thus to realize the *opportunity* of physicality. They strove not to eradicate the body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation." Also, "Although Catherine [of Siena] abhorred her own flesh, condemning it as a 'dung heap,' she saw the fleshliness of Christ not as some sort of miraculous protection to save us from human vulnerability but as the 'way' or 'bridge' to lead us to salvation through suffering. … Thus, hateful as body may have been to Catherine, it was body that she saw as uniting us to the body of God. And it united us to God by suffering" (75).

## 2.3 Limits and Importance of the Disruption

Perceval's sister disrupts the social and ideological systems that subordinate women in the *Morte*, yet there are some serious limitations to the challenge she presents—her early and self-sacrificial death means that she is not a character for female readers to imitate and that her influence in the text is contained. Kraemer rightly points out that Perceval's sister "would have a powerful appeal for Malory's female readers" because she is shown "as a woman in charge of her own destiny."[32] However, the particular kind of heroic example Perceval's sister presents is also a no-win situation for women readers who want to "take the good and honest actes [of the *Morte*] in their remembraunce and to folowe the same" as the publisher Caxton blithely advises in his 1485 preface to the *Morte,*[33] but who also want to *live*. Remembering the story of the Roman noblewoman whose suicide was widely held up as an example of feminine virtue, I call this the Lucretia Problem: the narrative trope in which a woman's life becomes most exemplary when she chooses to end that life.[34] Perceval's sister's holiness, unlike the male knights', is established most vividly through selflessness and suffering. Scott describes her as "selfless and good," but this equivalence of selflessness with goodness is implicitly gendered: The male knights do not have to be selfless in order to be good, and they can pursue holiness without

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[32] Kraemer, 82.
[33] Caxton, 817.
[34] See page 5 of my Introduction. Lucretia is a survivor of rape who then ends her own life for the sake of her husband's honor. For an early version of the story of Lucretia, see Livy's *The History of Rome*, Book 1, chapters 57-59, available in Latin and English from the Perseus Digital Library at <www.perseus.tufts.edu>. For two examples (among many) of rapturous admiration of Lucretia's exemplary virtue, see Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 1680-1885 and Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, 218.

emptying themselves in the way that their female companion does.[35] For this reason, Hoffman argues that even though Perceval's sister, as Thornton and May claim, plays a larger role in the *Morte*, "the consequence of that enlargement does not seem quite as felicitous for women (or men) as Thornton and May would like it to be. She does not present a model that a good many women would be wise to follow[.]" I agree with Hoffman that though Perceval's sister is a serious "rebuke to men" in the Grail quest, she is "no happy model for women."[36] Perceval's sister strongly challenges the text's conceptions of women, but because her holy death is her most prominent accomplishment, she does not present a livable alternative.

Men and their social structures in the *Morte*, as we have seen, variously attempt to restrict women's activity—and in the case of Perceval's sister, the story itself restricts her activity severely by killing her off early in the Grail quest. Traxler puts it starkly: Perceval's sister is "a character who threatens to break free of the space allowed her," but to do her part in the quest, she is "reduced to an almost stereotypical safe, nameless, and self-sacrificing figure."[37] While I still maintain that Perceval's sister challenges the male-dominated structures of the text by disrupting its expectations of feminine behavior and feminine moral symbolism, I acknowledge that her death to some degree contains the threat to the status quo. Because her death closes off many areas of potential action for

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[35] Scott, 23. See also Kraemer, 81-82 on female saints and suffering. The expectations are different for male Grail seekers in the *Morte*: Galahad, for example, accepts that going after a single knight is unworthy of him, so he lets Bors do it and he continues with his own quest (769). Bors, as discussed above, chooses to preserve his own soul rather than risk it to save the souls of the women at the tower (740). The male Grail seekers regard themselves as important, and their goodness does not depend on giving up their own interests (certainly not their own lives) in order to benefit other people.

[36] Hoffman, 73.

[37] Traxler, 273. Traxler is writing about the French *Queste*, but the plot points in question are similar in the *Morte*.

this remarkable woman character, we do not get to find out what would have happened if she had lived until end of the quest, and whether she would have experienced the final vision with Galahad. Perceval's sister's self-sacrificial death limits (but does not erase) the ways in which we can read her as a challenge to the male-dominated structures of the *Morte*.

Perceval's sister does not reach the Grail, and the Noble Tale does not take great interest in her own spiritual experience but largely develops her as a symbol of spiritual realities experienced by men. I do not (like Thornton and May) assert that Malory makes her a "participant in the quest" rivaling the male knights.[38] She only arrives at Sarras as a corpse, and she never even once sees a vision of the Grail while she travels with the knights in the Grail quest. To put the spiritual economy of the quest a bit crudely: Though Perceval's sister is at least as holy as Perceval and Bors, Galahad's male sidekicks, the *Morte* does not compensate her with Grail visions commensurate to her spiritual qualifications.[39] She functions as a spiritual guide to the knights and as a symbol reflecting the Eucharist and the Grail, but Malory does not seem particularly interested in her spiritual state, as he is with the other quasi- Grail knight, Lancelot. We know that Perceval's sister is an intrepid traveler, that she has given up a royal worldly life in order to pursue holiness, that she has somehow learned the history of the ancient relics connected to the Grail quest, that she believes the Grail quest is an "adventure…ordayned" for her (760), and that she is generous and courageous enough to give her life for another. We do not know how she learns the Grail quest's lore and her

[38] Thornton and May, 48.
[39] See David Eugene Clark, "Constructing Spiritual Hierarchy Through Mass Attendance in the *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015) and also Kraemer, 66, 82-83 on rankings and rewards in the Grail quest.

part in it—whether she is told about it by ancient or prophetic sources, as the knights are, or whether she herself is a mystic who learns such things in solitary visions. She is a small part in a larger story, a story that is mostly about men. Perceval's sister helps these men reach the Grail, and while she is a powerful symbol of the object of their quest, she herself participates in the quest only in a limited way.

Yet in The Noble Tale of The Sankgreal and in the larger context of the *Morte Darthur*, Perceval's sister powerfully reframes questions of identity, authority, and gender. She denies the knights the ability to define themselves as strong or holy against her either as a passive object to be rescued or a symbol of sin to be shunned by virtuous knights. By undermining Nacien's prohibition, she implies that the trusted authorities who are given structural power by communities in the text can still be questioned. Her negotiation of gendered expectations as a virginal character in the Grail quest shows that women's and men's gender identities here and in the whole of the *Morte* should not be read only in terms of their sexual experiences (or desires or desirability or availability), but also their social ones.

Perceval's sister significantly disrupts the *Morte*'s teaching of secular and chivalric misogyny. Though I do not see Perceval's sister as a triumphant feminist role model for readers to imitate, she nevertheless assails the *Morte*'s most fundamental and constraining assumptions about women. The Pentecostal Oath authoritatively articulates what is expected of knights and tacitly implies what is expected of women in chivalric society; by refusing to be rescued and instead shedding her own blood to rescue a lady, Perceval's sister breaks the confines of the Oath and also makes it impossible for her

male companions—who are discovering the new expectations of the Grail quest—to fall back on their secular identities as powerful knights who rescue ladies.

Disrupting the community's assignments of gendered meaning, Perceval's sister thoroughly dismantles the spiritual misogyny of Nacien's prohibition by functioning as a spiritual guide and a symbol of the Grail in its Eucharistic function. Thus she claims the Grail quest as her own adventure, her own calling, and she refuses to be pushed to its margins despite the spiritual misogyny that pervades the Grail quest from its inception. Critics have previously recognized Perceval's sister's Christlike nature as a reprimand to the male knights' individual righteousness, but they have not recognized her spiritual authority and Eucharistic symbolism and the resulting challenge she brings to the systemic spiritual misogyny of The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal.

Both as an authority and as a symbol of the Eucharist, Perceval's sister pushes back against the gendered symbolism that would marginalize her role in the Grail quest. It is true that she is a symbol, more than a full participant in the quest, and one could read this symbolic status as a way that she is subsumed into the spiritual identities of the male Grail seekers. However, when we talk about symbols—especially in the spiritual context of the Grail quest—it is essential to parse their content and implications rather than merely set aside the symbolic elements from the plot-level actions. The fact that Perceval's sister symbolizes the Eucharist is particularly important in the context of the spiritual misogyny that tries to use lust as a representation of all sin and women's bodies as a representation for male knights' lust. After Nacien's prohibition, the knights try to leave their sins behind by leaving women behind, and Bors and Perceval defeat sin by defeating the female forms of the devil. The Grail quest continually casts women, and

women's bodies in particular, as symbols of sin to be pushed as far away from the stories of holy knights on a holy quest as possible. And yet, Perceval's sister symbolizes the Eucharistic Grail which is at the very center of the spiritual quest. Her body and blood, like the body and blood of Christ so often encountered in the Eucharistic Grail, become physical elements that connect humanity with divine healing and divine nourishment. Though in an ideal world, women would not be written as symbols for spiritual realities experienced primarily by men, in the existing world, it makes a difference whether a woman is written as a symbol of the defiling flesh of worldly temptation or of the regenerating flesh of God.

Perceval's sister thoroughly disrupts the *Morte*'s teachings about women and their place in the chivalric and spiritual worlds. She is not someone whom other women would do well to imitate in the way that Sidney and Caxton see men imitating the examples of their literary heroes in order to become better. Yet she challenges male structures of control on an imaginative and structural level because she is represented as a courageous, independent, holy, and authoritative spiritual guide. She is a woman who does not need to be rescued and who signifies not the worldly distractions of the flesh but its Eucharistic potential for union with spiritual things. She is a disruptive guide who challenges authorities and expectations and who understands the spiritual mysteries of the Grail quest better than anyone else—and in a sense, she becomes the Grail.

# CHAPTER 3. JULIET *IN VITA*

## 3.1 Shakespearean Teaching and Petrarchan Poetry

Shakespeare is not usually so eager to point out the useful lessons in his work as Malory is, and drama is a slippery, protean form of teaching. While Samuel Johnson, in his *Preface to Shakespeare,* maintains (with Sidney) that "the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing" and to some extent sees Shakespeare as achieving that end, Johnson's biggest objection to Shakespeare is that he "is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose."[1] And yet, later generations of viewers and readers have enthusiastically taken up Shakespeare's works as delightful teaching in a Sidneian vein. The nineteenth-century author and Shakespeare critic Anna Jameson reads Shakespeare for moral guidance.[2] Alison Shell, in a 2014 monograph, comments on the persistence of reading Shakespeare "for edification" in the present outside of professional scholarship.[3] A 2016 BBC feature with the headline "Be Cleopatra, not a Kardashian, girls advised," bears out Shell's claim: The head of Wimbledon High School, Jane Lunnon, is piloting a curriculum to present Shakespeare's women characters as empowering "role models" for young women, with hopes to expand the program widely. Lunnon focuses on the adaptability and strength of Shakespearan women and not

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[1] Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare, 1765," *eBooks @ Adelaide,* University of Adelaide Library, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/johnson/samuel/preface/preface.html .

[2] Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines*, ed. Cheri L. Larsen Hoeckley (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2005), 54-57, 71, etc.

[3] Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2. Shell notes the Church of England services still held in honor of Shakespeare at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon (1) and claims that despite Shakespeare's originally suspicious reception by the devout, many now read his work as "secular scripture" (29).

on their sufferings but on "how they respond" to the challenges they face.[4] Sidney would approve of such plan to use literature to teach exemplary behavior, but many readers on social media responded to the story with skepticism and mockery, in part because of the lower-than-optimal survival rate of Shakespearean heroines. I would not wish for any young women I know to take Juliet as a pattern, and I am not contending that Shakespeare's primary intent in *Romeo and Juliet* or any other work was didactic or moral—nevertheless, Shakespeare's imitations of human behavior do serve to teach by revealing what can go right and what can go wrong in human interactions.

I argue that *Romeo and Juliet* specifically critiques Petrarchan poetry and its underlying Neoplatonic theory of love as dangerous ways of interaction, as patterns of devotion that can hurt women by seeming to exalt them. Romeo is a Petrarchan lover who sees Juliet as a saint, and his spiritual quest is to ascend heavenward through his devotion to her. Yet Shakespeare represents Juliet as a woman who is astute enough to see problems with being the object of such a quest. She strives for mutuality and openness, and she pushes back when Romeo's Petrarchan poetry constructs distance between the two lovers rather than bringing them together. In both the meeting sonnet and the balcony scene, Juliet works to interact authentically with Romeo as an equal, and she skillfully teaches him to modify his spiritualized, poetic form of love to make such interaction possible. Nevertheless, Romeo persists in conceiving of Juliet as a saint, and Juliet's metaphorical sainthood leads to her literal death, as I will argue in the next chapter.

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[4] Judith Burns, "Be Cleopatra not a Kardashian, girls advised," *BBC News*, 5 October 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/education-37555910 .

Romeo and Juliet first meet in a witty, gorgeous sonnet at the Capulets' party. Everything here is light and music; Romeo has just seen Juliet for the first time. Instantly forgetting his former love, Rosaline, he manages to get a word with the blazingly beautiful Juliet and turns the full force of his practiced Petrarchan charm on her. She replies with at least equal eloquence. Juliet knows how to play sonnets too, and she carries on both the metaphor and the rhyme scheme Romeo started until she chooses to permit a kiss at the climax of their collaborative poem:

ROMEO
If I profane with my unworthiest hand
        This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
        To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET
Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
        Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
        And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO
Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET
        Aye, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO
O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
        They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET
Saints do not move, though grant for prayer's sake.

ROMEO
Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.
(1.4.206-219)[5]

[5] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All subsequent parenthetical references to *Romeo and Juliet* are from this edition.

The meeting sonnet is a moment of ecstatic beauty for the lovers. However, it is more than that. Complex and eerie things lurk under the surface of the poem, particularly in the image of Juliet as a saint. The problem with the lovers' poetic vision of Juliet as a saint is that saints have to be dead. While living holy people may sometimes be called saints in Protestant contexts, saints of the kind to whom devotees address prayers, build shrines, and take pilgrimages (as Romeo wants to do for Juliet in the meeting sonnet) are *Catholic saints*, people who necessarily have already died.

The play, then, implies Juliet's death from the very beginning of the titular lovers' relationship. The meeting sonnet reverberates in the play's final act and explores the hazards of love poetry itself, which can entomb the beloved woman in the process of praising her. Imagery of devotion to saints in the sonnet implies Juliet's death, but Juliet wants to be a living person and tries to modify Romeo's devotion and renegotiate her place in the poem. In both the meeting sonnet and the balcony scene, Juliet pushes back against Romeo's Petrarchan poetry and works toward openness and mutuality. However, Romeo's insistence on Juliet's sainthood ultimately leads to the death it foreshadows, and through their story Shakespeare critiques Petrarchan and Neoplatonic love's risk of killing the women it praises.

## 3.2 Romeo as Petrarchan Poet and Neoplatonic Lover

Romeo is a Petrarchan poet before and after he meets Juliet. Complementing the play's Italian geographic setting, Shakespeare infuses *Romeo and Juliet* with an Italian poetic tradition: the Petrarchan love lyric. Though Petrarch lived in Italy in the fourteenth

century, translations and new poems in his style were popular in mid-fifteenth-century Britain and ripe for mockery in the 1590s. Romeo's irreverently witty companion, Mercutio, makes fun of Romeo's lovelorn demeanor by comparing Romeo's effusions about Rosaline with Petrarchan poetry: "Now he is for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura to his lady was a kitchen-wench—marry, she had a better love to berhyme her" (2.3.38-9). And Mercutio is right to place Romeo in the legacy of Petrarch. Robert S. Miola explains that while we do not know whether Shakespeare read Petrarch directly, Petrarchan style and subject matter are certainly at play in Shakespeare's works:

> Though no one has proved that he ever read a single Italian poem, Shakespeare shows a pervasive indebtedness to Italian love poetry for both the form and content of his sonnets. Italian influence flowed throughout Elizabethan literary culture, beginning with Thomas Wyatt's and the Earl of Surrey's Petrarchan adaptations in Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557), and culminating in the sonneteering vogue of the 1590s.[6]

Miola goes on to argue that though the sonnets show some Petrarchan features, "Shakespeare's reading of Italian love poetry and of Petrarchan tradition culminates in his plays, especially in *Romeo and Juliet*."[7]

Romeo's love-speeches—the ones about Rosaline and the ones about Juliet—display the Petrarchan qualities of paradoxical language, intense interiority, intricate metaphor, and spiritualized love. When Romeo first walks onstage and sees that there has been a fight, he equates love and hate, employing Petrarchan contraries to express his own internal troubles about his unrequited love for Rosaline:

> Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
> O anything of nothing first created;
> O heavy lightness, serious vanity,

[6] Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33.
[7] Miola, 39.

> Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
> Still-waking sleep that is not what it is:
> This love feel I, that feel no love in this.
> (1.1.172-178)

In moments like these, Romeo's verbal conformity to the distinctive idiom of Petrarchan paradox and his inward turn—the way he makes everything else about his own feelings—fully justify Mercutio's mocking association with Petrarch.

Paradox is a striking feature of Petrarch's poems as well as the English tradition influenced by them. In one poem, Petrarch's speaker confusedly laments, "chi me fa morto et vivo, / chi 'n un punto m'agghiaccia et mi riscalda" ("She makes me die and live; She burns and freezes me").[8] Elsewhere he tries to sort out the conflicted feelings of his love:

> S'a mia voglia ardo, onde 'l pianto e lamento?
> S'a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?
> O viva morte, o dilectoso male,
> come puoi tanto in me, s'io nol consento?
>
> (If willingly I burn, why weep and grieve?
> Unwillingly, what can lamenting do?
> O, living death; O, pleasurable pain,
> Can you hold sway in me if I refuse?)

In English poetry, many of the lyrics in Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* (originally published in 1557 but reprinted many times through 1587) pick up on the Petrarchan trope of the paradoxical lover. "I find no peace, and all my warre is done: / I feare, and hope: I burne, and frese like yse," says one speaker in the section attributed to Henry Howard. Another lovelorn speaker complains, "Holding my peace alas how loud I crye ...

[8] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 105.89-90. Citations to Petrarch's poems are cited by poem number, not by page number.

Burning in flame, quaking for cold that grones ... I serve unbound, fast fettred yet I lye."[9] Romeo, like Petrarch's speaker and these English Petrarchan speakers, both speaks in riddling paradox and tends to prioritize his own interior responses over the prosaic events out the outside world.

Romeo also displays Petrarchan poetry's spiritual aspirations in love and its propensity for complex, punning metaphor. He sounds like a young John Donne when he declares his loyalty to Rosaline using religious idiom and quick transformations of language. After Benvolio suggests that he might find other women more beautiful if he looked at them, Romeo protests,

> When the devout religion of mine eye
> Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fire;
> And these who, often drowned, could never die,
> Transparent heretics be burnt for liars.
> (1.2.91-94)

Romeo describes his love for Rosaline as a religion from which it would be heresy to depart, figures his weeping as drowning (but because his eyes are heretical witches, they do not die from the drowning), and puns on "transparent" because his eyes are literally what he sees through but would also be seen through as obvious heretics if he betrayed Rosaline. Donne, another canny appropriator of Petrarchan poetry, deploys metaphors about weeping similarly and also allows a similar slippage between religious and amorous language in his English poems "The Canonization" and "I am a little world." Petrarch's speaker over and over again describes his devotion to his lady in religious terms and uses intricate metaphors. He calls the lady "l'idolo mio, scolpito in vivo lauro"

[9] Paul A. Marquis, ed. *Richard Tottel's Songes and Sonnettes: The Elizabethan Version* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 54.1-2, 261.1, 4, 11. Citations to poems from *Songes and Sonnettes* are by poem number in Marquis' edition, not by page number. For notes on printing dates, see xv-xvi in the Textual Introduction.

("My idol, sculpted in the living laurel"), and he compares seeing her to the beatific vision the saints experience of God in heaven, wondering if his life can be sustained merely by the sight of her.[10] In verbal habits, psychological inwardness, and spiritual aspirations, Romeo stands out as a Petrarchan lover.

Critics have long debated the extent and significance of Romeo's Petrarchism. Some have claimed that it is an insincere affectation which Romeo abandons when he meets Juliet and comes to know true love. Anna Jameson declares with Victorian fervor that Romeo immediately and dramatically drops the "picked phrases" of "the numbers that Petrarch flowed in" when he sees Juliet and moves into a love "concentrated, earnest, rapturous in the feeling and the expression."[11] R. Stamm, though acknowledging that the transition takes time and "Romeo is not suddenly turned into a new man by love at first sight," nevertheless sees a marked division between Romeo's "new passionate and his former rhetorical self."[12]

Others claim that though Romeo's love changes when he meets Juliet, his poetic expressions mostly do not. Rosalie Colie argues that "Romeo by no means abandons sonnet-language because he has in fact fallen truly in love—again and again in his speeches to and about Juliet, conventional sonnet-topics turn up."[13] Gayle Whittier sees Romeo's poetic development as an ongoing process in which his poetry about Rosaline and his poetry about Juliet are in continuity: "Significantly, Romeo does not attain poetic

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[10] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 30.27, 191.
[11] Anna Jameson, 136.
[12] R. Stamm, "The First Meeting of the Lovers in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*," *English Studies* 67, no. 1 (1986): 13, 8.
[13] Rosalie L. Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Pres, 1974), 141. See also Marianne Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 101. Novy claims that Romeo's love imagery becomes much less violent when he switches from Rosaline to Juliet.

mastery at the sight of Juliet; his apprenticeship begins before he sees her, reaches some perfection, and requires sequentiality, subjugation to the world of time, to an influence Juliet catalyzes but does not beget."[14] Daniel Albright notes that though the object of Romeo's love has changed, Romeo "does not repudiate Petrarchan conceits" when he begins making love speeches to Juliet; "instead, he moves ever deeper into the world of Petrarch and the sonnet."[15] Miola claims that when Romeo falls in love with Juliet, he does not "outgrow" Petrarchism, but instead, "Shakespeare transforms Petrarchan conventions into beautiful expressions of intimacy and love."[16]

I agree that Romeo remains a Petrarchan poet when he falls in love with Juliet. Indeed, Romeo's opening lines in the meeting sonnet, which I examine in detail later, are some of the most Petrarchan ones in the play—they show both the elaborate metaphor and the spiritual aspiration typical of Petrarchan love poetry. When Romeo is in the Capulet garden unseen by Juliet, he continues the Petrarchan poetry by trying out various heavenly metaphors for Juliet. She is "the sun" (2.1.46), she is a vestal virgin to the moon (47-51), stars have run an errand and asked "her eyes / To twinkle in their spheres till they return" (58-60). It all circles back to the image of the sun's light, and Romeo continues to make the same metaphorical leaps of Petrarchism (with the same hazard of

[14] Gayle Whittier, "The Sonnet's Body and the Body Sonnetized in Romeo and Juliet," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 49.
[15] Daniel Albright, *Musicking Shakespeare: A Conflict of Theatres* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 48. All along, Albright says, Romeo has been living in the "world ruled by Francesco Petrarcha," in which, even before the entrance of Juliet "he finds himself compulsively speaking sonnets" (47). Though "The deconstructionist Mercutio," mocking Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline "continually urges Romeo to understand the Petrarchan conceits as a conventional, stylized, boring way of thinking and speaking," Romeo persists in the dramatic extremes of love poetry (47)
[16] Miola, 39.

incongruity and superfluity) here as in his poetry on Rosaline and in the sonnet where he meets Juliet.

Critics, especially those who believe that Romeo abandons Petrarchism when he falls in love with Juliet, often conflate the question of Romeo's sincerity with that of his proficiency in poetic craft, meanwhile assuming that Petrarchan poetry is intrinsically both insincere and aesthetically bad. This view oversimplifies the nature of Shakespeare's anti-Petrarchism in *Romeo and Juliet*. While Romeo becomes a much more sincere lover and a somewhat better poet when he falls in love with Juliet, he remains a thoroughly Petrarchan poet-lover for the duration of his life. I argue that it is neither insincerity nor aesthetic failure in Petrarchan poetry, but rather its spiritual aspiration, that the play critiques most strongly.

Plenty of anti-Petrarchans (including Donne and including Shakespeare himself elsewhere, such as in Sonnet 130) have mocked the aesthetic absurdity of some Petrarchan praise and its ulterior motive as a way to woo ladies, yet this is not what Shakespeare is doing in *Romeo and Juliet*. Petrarchan lovers are often reviled for ingenuously flattering women in celestial terms in order to achieve carnal ends. But here Shakespeare instead asks what would happen if a Petrarchan lover really meant everything he said—and the result is dire. If Romeo is a lover who genuinely sees Juliet as a perfect heavenly saint and believes that he himself can reach blessedness through her, then the play critiques not the easy target of Petrarchism used as flattery, but rather the harder mark of spiritualized romantic love in its sincere form. Though Shakespeare often disregards classical rules for constructing tragedy, in this case he follows one—Romeo is a tragic figure because he is a good but imperfect person. The aspirations that

Romeo thinks are the most noble are the ones that destroy everything. Romeo's archetypally tragic line after Mercutio is mortally wounded applies to Romeo's love as well: "I thought all for the best" (3.1.104). The most high-minded form of love lays the lovers low. As Shakespeare shapes the story, both Juliet and the audience can see that true Petrarchan love is fundamentally far more dangerous than idle flattery. I argue that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare engages with the conventions of Petrarchan poetry not to snipe at its most common failings but to show the dark side of its highest ideals.

The idealized type of spiritual love expressed by Petrarch and his imitators was also theorized by Neoplatonic writers of philosophy, social theory, and etiquette. While the poetic legacy of Petrarch is certainly present in the play, the influence of Neoplatonism, exemplified in Castiglione's conduct book *The Courtier*, is equally relevant and less studied.[17] The Petrarchan poetic tradition and Castiglione's theories on love are both early modern adaptations of medieval courtly love: Petrarchan poetry is an aesthetic manifestation of courtly love, and Castiglione's *Courtier* contains a corresponding ideological one in a form that was popular in translation in Elizabethan England through a 1561 translation by Thomas Hoby. Romeo works in the verbal style of Petrarchan poetry, and the underlying theory of spiritual love at work is the Neoplatonism articulated by Castiglione. *The Courtier* is not the most complete or original articulation of Neoplatonic love, but its entertaining format as a dialogue and its copious advice for those who might wish to become more courtly made it internationally popular. Castiglione's portrait of the perfect courtier is particularly important for *Romeo and Juliet*

[17] See Adam Max Cohen, "The Mirror of All Christian Courtiers: Castiglione's *Cortegiano* as a Source for *Henry V*" in *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Remaking, Rewriting, Refashioning*, ed. Michele Marapodi (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 39-40 and footnotes for an overview of the case that Shakespeare used *The Courtier* as a source for courtly characters in other plays.

because it includes a theory of perfect love—a spiritualized love in which physical consummation is unimportant, and the male lover ascends to divine enlightenment by gazing on a beautiful woman.

In the stylized conversations that make up *The Courtier*, the character Pietro Bembo (who is a fictionalized version of a real person of that name, a Neoplatonist author) claims that "love is nothing but a certain desire to enjoy beauty," and he describes love as a "ladder" with "the image of sensual beauty at its lowest rung" going up toward "the lofty mansion where heavenly, lovely, and true beauty dwells, which lies hidden in the inmost secret recesses of God."[18] The lover, according to Castiglione's Bembo, must use his sense of sight rather than seeking physical contact with the woman he loves. Thus

> he must consider that, just as one cannot hear with his palate or smell with his ears, so also beauty can in no way be enjoyed, nor can the desire it excites in our minds be satisfied through the sense of touch, but only by way of that sense whereof this beauty is the true object, namely, the faculty of sight.[19]

This love is like Dante's love for Beatrice: It is fueled by glances only and need never be consummated physically.[20] Also like Dante's love for Beatrice—and mirroring the interiority and spiritual aspiration of Petrarchan poetry—the love described in *The Courtier* inspires a rich emotional experience in the male lover and can gradually lead him toward the contemplation of universal, heavenly beauty. The spiritual lover can "make use of this love as a step by which to mount to a love far more sublime…. And

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[18] Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles Singleton, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: Norton, 2002) 243, 257.
[19] Castiglione, 251.
[20] The love of Dante for Beatrice is perhaps best known from *The Divine Comedy*, but see Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001), especially sections 2-5, for Dante's more focused depiction of his spiritual love for Beatrice and its emphasis on visual encounters with her beauty.

thus he will no longer contemplate the particular beauty of one woman, but that universal beauty which adorns all bodies."[21] The individual beautiful woman, then, becomes a conduit by which the spiritual lover learns to perceive higher beauty: This love is only the beginning of the lover's spiritual ascent.

Finally, Bembo explains, after a long process of contemplation initiated by loving a woman's physical beauty, the lover's soul ascends to a higher plane of perception, and he enjoys a mystic glimpse of divine beauty:

> Thus, when it has grown blind to earthly things, the soul acquires a very keen perception of heavenly things…and, ravished by the splendor of that light, begins to kindle and to pursue it so eagerly that it is almost drunk and beside itself in its desire to unite itself to that beauty, thinking to have found the footprint of God, in the contemplation of which it seeks to rest in its blessed end. And thus, burning with this most happy flame, it rises to its noblest part, which is the intellect; and there, no longer darkened by the obscure night of earthly things, it beholds divine beauty.

Then the soul of the spiritual lover rises even further, moving from its "particular intellect" to "universal intellect," and finally to the full beatific vision of "pure divine beauty":

> Hence the soul, aflame with the most holy fire of true divine love, flies to unite itself with the angelic nature; and not only completely abandons the senses, but has no longer any need for reason's discourse; for, transformed into an angel, it understands all things intelligible, and without any veil or cloud views the wide sea of pure divine beauty, and receives it into itself, enjoying that supreme happiness of which the senses are incapable.[22]

The lover uses his sense of sight and a beautiful woman to move toward an experience of the divine that transcends both the senses and earthly rationality. Thus Castiglione provides a more detailed (and even more ambitious) theory for the spiritually aspiring

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[21] Castiglione, 255.
[22] Castiglione, 256.

type of love expressed in Petrarchan poetry. Castiglione's model, I argue, underlies Romeo's attempts at spiritual love.

Many of Petrarch's poems and some by his English followers use this Neoplatonic model of spiritual ascent through love. In one such poem, Petrarch's speaker addresses his own soul and admonishes it to be thankful for the first time he saw the lady because of the spiritual benefits of loving her:

> I' benedico il loco e 'l tempo et l'ora
> che sí alto miraron gli occhi mei,
> et dico: Anima, assai ringratiar dêi
> che fosti a tanto honor degnata allora.
> Da lei ti vèn l'amoroso pensero,
> che mentre 'l segui al sommo ben t'invia,
> pocho prezando quel ch'ogni huom desia;
> d lei vien l'animosa leggiadria
> ch'al ciel ti scorge per destro sentero,
> sí ch'i' vo già de la speranza altero.
>
> (I gladly bless the place, the time, the hour
> My eyes raised to those heights their wondering gaze
> And say: "Soul, give most fervent thanks that you
> Were then deemed worthy of such honor great.
> "From her there comes to you that loving thought
> Which, while you follow, leads to highest good—
> To prize but little what each man desires;
> "And from her springs that valiant grace which will
> Mark out for you the proper path to heaven,"
> Thus I go forth already, high in hope.")[23]

In poems like this, Petrarch's speaker follows the model of spiritual love that Castiglione outlines. The speaker aspires to get closer to heaven through his visual encounters with the lady.

Petrarch does not always write love as a positive spiritual aspiration in line with Castiglione's Neoplatonic ideal, but he continually sees such spiritual aspiration as the

[23] Petrarch, trans. Cooke, 13.5-14.

highest potential of earthly love. Miola contrasts Petrarch's more ambiguous views on the spiritual benefits of love with Dante's: "But throughout the *Rime sparse,* Petrarch, unlike Dante, struggles with earthly desire, doubt, and disappointment. … Not ennobling, this love sometimes feels like a youthful error…a stumbling block, an occasion of sin, a peril to his soul."[24] In fact, Petrarch's body of poems presents love as *both* ennobling *and* sinful, depending on the occasion and the speaker's mood at the time. In a poem that embodies this ambiguity perfectly, the speaker and Love are rivals in court who present their cases before the judge Reason. The speaker alleges that Love has caused him extreme suffering, wasted his youth, and taken him further from loving God as he should.[25] When Love takes the floor for a rebuttal, Love instead claims to have given great gifts to the ungrateful speaker and taught him both poetry and virtue. Describing a spiritual ascent through the beloved lady (as Pietro Bembo outlines in *The Courtier*), Love claims:

> Anchor, et questo è quel che tutto Avanza,
> da volar sopra 'l ciel li avea dat' ali,
> per le cose mortali
> che son scala al fattor, chi ben l'estima:
> ché, mirando ei ben fiso quante at quali
> eran vertuti in quella sua speranza,
> d'una in altra sembianza
> potea levarsi a l'alta cagion prima;
> et ei l'à detto alcuna volta in rima…
>
> (Yet more, and this surpasses all, I gave
> Him wings to soar above the heavens through
> Things mortal, valued right
> A stairway to our Maker; so when he
> Gazed fixedly upon the number and
> The kind of virtues in the hoped-for one,

[24] Miola, 34.
[25] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 360.16-75.

> From one resemblance to the next
> He could have risen to the high First Cause,
> As he has sometimes said himself in rhyme.)[26]

Reason delays giving judgment between the speaker and Love, and so the case is left unsettled. Petrarch's poems both complain of the pains and moral dangers of love and extol it as a teacher of virtue—sometimes both in the same poem.

Of these two strains present in Petrarch's poetry, the English imitators in Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* in general prefer to rail against the follies of love rather than to extol its spiritual benefits, but both strains are still present. Indeed, *Songes and Sonettes* contains a fairly close translation of Petrarch's above-quoted poem in which Love and the speaker argue about the harms and benefits Love has conferred.[27] Some poems in Tottel's collection are more earthy, while others show love as ennobling. Shakespeare would also have seen spiritually aspiring love in Sidney's *Arcadia*, where the prince Pyrocles argues that his love for a woman is practice for "heavenly love" and inspires him to be more virtuous.[28] Shakespeare was familiar with the continuum of earthly and spiritual poetic treatments of love and, I argue, places Romeo toward the spiritual end of it in order to critique Petrarchan love in its most ambitious form.

Romeo, as a Petrarchan poet and a Neoplatonic lover, sees Juliet as a source of both visual light and spiritual enlightenment. Imagery of light for beauty, inherited from Petrarch and Castiglione, informs Romeo's ways of perceiving Juliet throughout the play.

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[26] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 360.136-144.
[27] *Songes and Sonettes*, ed. Marquis, 69. This poem is in the section attributed to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey.
[28] Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), 136.

For Castiglione, the beauty that leads to the divine vision is, over and over again, figured as light. The divine essence, says Bembo, reveals itself by *shining* though human beauty:

> when it finds a face well proportioned and composed of a certain radiant harmony of various colors set off by light and shadow, and by measured distance and limited outline, [divine beauty] infuses itself therein and shines forth most beautifully and adorns and illumines with grace and a wondrous splendor the object wherein it shines, like a sunbeam striking upon a beautiful vase of polished gold set with precious gems.[29]

A beautiful face (already marked by radiance) serves to reflect and communicate divine beauty (also figured as light). Bembo believes that beauty is by nature morally good, and "by her light conquers the darkness of the body." He describes beauty as "a heavenly ray."[30] In Castiglione's depiction of ideal love, the beloved woman's beauty is continually experienced as a light that reflects and leads to the higher light of divine beauty. Petrarch's speaker also habitually describes his beloved lady as a visual and spiritual light. In one poem, he tells the lady that the light of her eyes is what leads him toward heaven and ennobles him:

> Gentil mia donna, i' veggio
> nel mover de' vostr'occhi un dolce lume
> che mi mostra la via ch'al ciel conduce;
> et per lungo custume,
> dentro là dove sol con Amor seggio,
> quasi visibilmente il cor traluce.
> Questa è la vista ch'a ben far m'induce,
> et che mi scorge al glorïoso fine;
> questa sola dal vulgo m'allontana…
>
> (Noble lady mine, I see
> A sweet light in the motion of your eyes
> That points me toward the path that leads to heaven;
> And there within where, by
> Long custom, I sit down alone with Love,

[29] Castiglione, 244.
[30] Castiglione, 249, 251.

> The heart is shining almost visibly.
> This vision is what leads me to do good,
> And it will guide me to a glorious end;
> From rabble this alone sets me apart.)[31]

In Sidney's English *Arcadia,* the lover Musidorus similarly sees his beloved Princess Pamela as an ennobling source of light. He calls her his "sun," repeatedly describes her bright "beams," and sings that she is "beyond humanity" and that his love for her elevates his mind even though he has no hope of attaining her.[32] Light is a recurring image for the beauty that inspires spiritual love.

Just as Castiglione and the Petrarchan poets expect the spiritual lover to do, Romeo encounters Juliet visually as a source of light and seeks spiritual enlightenment from being close to her. In the Capulets' hall, when he sees Juliet for the very first time, Romeo exclaims, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" (1.4.157) The hall is brightly lit, and Juliet is (in Romeo's view) intrinsically incandescent. When Romeo sees Juliet as a source of light, he also hopes to become "blessed" by closer contact with her (1.4.164). At the balcony, she is "the sun" (2.1.46) and closely associated with heavenly figures, and she even makes the tomb "a feasting presence full of light" (5.3.86). At their first encounter and persistently throughout the play, Romeo sees Juliet as visually and spiritually radiant, and he describes her beauty primarily in terms of light.

The way that Romeo sees Juliet as light is even more striking because he has so far seen himself as the opposite of light. If Juliet the beautiful woman is (as Castiglione would have it) a source of spiritual light, then Romeo is a darkling soul in dire need of

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[31] Petrarch, trans. Cooke, 72.1-9. For more of this ubiquitous light imagery in Petrarch, see also poems 11, 18, 37, 59, 95, 107, 125, 127, 144, 154, 162, 204.
[32] Sidney, *Arcadia*, 185 and 187. Musidorus is in disguise as Dorus the shepherd, and he sings these descriptions of Pamela in his first poetic contest in the Eclogues at the end of Book I.

that light. The first description of Romeo in the play, spoken by Benvolio to Lady Montague, shows Romeo wandering in a dark grove an hour before sunrise (1.1.114-119). Petrarch's speaker, a lovesick insomniac like Romeo, similarly describes his habit of wandering in the woods at night.[33] Expanding on Benvolio's characterization, Montague then describes Romeo as a person who avoids and even works against the light of the sun. Romeo is often seen "Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs" (1.1.129). As soon as the sun rises, says Montague,

> Away from light steals home my heavy son,
> And private in his chamber pens himself,
> Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,
> And makes himself an artificial night.
> (1.1.133-36)

This last phrase has a double meaning—Romeo both makes an artificial night *for* himself by closing up his chamber and makes an artificial night *of* himself by being temperamentally dark and gloomy. The melancholy Romeo has become nocturnal, and before the advent of Juliet he is a creeping creature who avoids sunlight. He is the opposite of light both by being heavy and by being dark.

Immediately before his encounter with Juliet, Romeo himself plays on his own personal opposition to light when he claims the role of torchbearer in order to shirk dancing. "Give me a torch," he says as he and his friends approach the Capulet banquet, "I am not for this ambling; / Being but heavy I will bear the light" (1.4.9-10). Romeo chooses to carry the light because his heart is not light. And, on being further pressed to dance, he insists, again punning on "light," "A torch for me. Let wantons light of heart / Tickle the senseless rushes with their heels . . . / I'll be a candle-holder and look on"

[33] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 22.

(1.4.33-37). Romeo is skeptical of the whole venture of going to the Capulet party at all, and his punning effectively limits his participation in the escapade while fitting in well with the mood of Mercutio's band of flippant young men. But at the same time, Romeo recognizes his own darkness and heaviness, and he realizes in this odd riddling way that light is the thing he needs and does not have on his own.

Romeo finds this missing light not in the torch he carries but in Juliet, whose brightness affects him as a spiritual epiphany. Romeo carries a torch in order to avoid being part of the party; he finds himself drawn into the festivities when his light is met and excelled by the light of Juliet, which is her own light and not a borrowed one. While he only carries a torch, she in her native radiance teaches the torches to shine. And immediately—just as Castiglione would have it—Romeo sees Juliet's brightness as a conduit to spiritual illumination. Her beauty is "too rich for use, for earth too dear" (1.4.160); when Romeo sees Juliet's radiant beauty, he is already thinking of her as something unearthly and beyond the reach of mortals such as himself.

Yet, paradoxically, he also plans to reach her and thereby to gain some of this spiritually elevated quality for himself: "The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand / And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand" (1.4.163-4). When he thinks about Juliet this way, Romeo is adhering to Castiglione's model of love in several important ways. He experiences Juliet's beauty visually as light, and he sees that beauty as a spiritual quality. Furthermore, he believes that he himself can become "blessed" by further encounters with Juliet—he sees her as a conduit for his own spiritual ascent, in accordance with Castiglione's idea of the ladder of love. However, Romeo also departs from Castiglione's model in one crucial way: he immediately wants to touch Juliet. In

Castiglione's model, love operates visually, and the lover progresses in his spiritual ascent by *seeing* beauty. Romeo, however, wants to become blessed by *touching* Juliet's hand with his own—and Bembo has warned that vision, not touch, is the correct sense for a spiritual lover to use. Romeo's love follows some of Bembo's directions for spiritual love and disregards others.

I argue that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare explores what can go wrong with the Neoplatonic kind of spiritual love idealized in Castiglione's *The Courtier* and expressed in the related tradition of Petrarchan love poetry. Things partly go wrong because of the dangers inherent in spiritualized love, and they partly go wrong because Romeo and Juliet do not fit the patterns established for spiritual lovers. While Romeo is a good Petrarchan lover and no worse than most as a Petrarchan poet, he does not meet Pietro Bembo's rigorous expectations for the spiritual lover—from the beginning, he wants physical, not merely visual, contact with Juliet. Juliet in turn meets neither Petrarchan poetry's nor Castiglione's expectations for a beloved woman. Juliet is not a sexually unattainable focus for futile desire and a muse for exquisitely self-absorbed lyrics. Rather, she returns Romeo's love and eagerly desires physical consummation. And rather than conforming *in absentia* to Romeo's poetic fantasies, Juliet is continually present to negotiate her own place in her relationship with Romeo and in its poetry. From the beginning, she resists being a distant object to be admired; from the beginning, she talks back.

## 3.3 Mutuality in the Meeting Sonnet

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the sonnet in which Romeo and Juliet first meet is its mutuality. It is a love sonnet where both lovers imagine and create together—not, as so frequently happens in Petrarchan poetry, one in which the male lover's internal world develops idiosyncratically without interference from the outside world or from the lady who is the object of his love. When Romeo starts speaking poetry, Juliet matches his wit. Her reply is all the more impressive because we know that it is composed on the spot, whereas Romeo has been starting to compose his entry 40 lines or so in advance of the sonnet. As he watches Juliet dance, he plans, "The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand / And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand" (1.4.163-64). The fact that Romeo works on his opening poetic figure before he speaks it to Juliet does not mean that it is an insincere Petrarchan pick up line; it would be unfair to conflate poetic effort with duplicity. However, Romeo's preparation does highlight Juliet's spontaneous verbal prowess. Juliet has no similar opportunity to prepare, yet her lines carry on the sonnet with subtlety and aplomb.

Critics have noted the remarkable mutuality of the meeting sonnet scene. Colie reads "the great sonnet exchange between Romeo and Juliet at their meeting" as "a sign of both their rhetorical sophistication and their union with one another."[34] That is, they are both adept poets, and they also enjoy an immediate and intuitive connection that allows them to speak collaboratively together this way. Marianne Novy sees the lovers' "openness and directness" in this first meeting scene as a contrast to "the romantic

[34] Colie, 137.

comedies, which celebrate the gradual triumph of love over the inhibitions and defenses of the lovers."[35] She claims that while other lovers must work toward such communication, Juliet and Romeo have it from the beginning. Miola reads the lovers' meeting as a Petrarchan sonnet turned into a dialogue where "The private voice of the Petrarchan lover becomes a conversation between two speakers, whose participation in the verse form, replete with answering rhymes, expresses their intimacy, sensuality, and exclusivity."[36] Indeed, there is nothing like this in Petrarch's poems or in Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes*. Sometimes in Petrarch's love poems, particularly those set after the lady's death, the lady talks to the speaker—but the lady who talks in these poems is a figment of the speaker's own wishful imagination, and she tells him what he wants to hear.[37] Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* contains a dialogue poem that appears even more crude in comparison with the meeting sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet*—in this poem, the lover pressures the lady to accept his advances and she quickly capitulates.[38] As do the Petrarch poems that approach dialogue, this poem seems more like something played over in the male lover's own mind than like a real encounter with a woman's separate will. Jill Levenson, in her introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* volume, notes that the mutuality of the sonnet is also one of Shakespeare's innovations on his immediate sources, Painter and Brooke. "Instead of the first conversation which Romeo

[35] Novy, 102.
[36] Miola, 39.
[37] In Petrarch, trans. Cook, 302, the speaker ascends to the lady in heaven in a vision, and she speaks reassuringly, telling him that they will be together after the judgment; this scene is reminiscent of Dante's interactions with Beatrice in *Paradiso*, but Petrarch writes the lady as much more soothing about her poet's eternal fate than Beatrice is. See also 281, 285, 341, 342, 346 (in which the lady still thinks of the speaker and wishes for his presence in heaven), 356, 359, and 362 (in which the speaker imagines himself visiting heaven and being commended by the lady for his repentance as he has aged). While she is still alive, the lady also greets the speaker on some occasions (63, 110), but her words are not reported, and the focus is on the speaker's psychological response rather than the lady's utterance.
[38] *Songes and Sonettes*, ed. Marquis, 113.

dominates in the sources," Levenson explains, "the lovers share verse as sensitive children might share a game…. They take part in a dialogue through which they begin to perceive each other, not narcissistically as mirror images, but mutually as distinct personalities."[39] Thus they avoid some of the relationally destructive isolation of Petrarchan love poetry by composing together rather than constructing fantasies in the absence of the beloved person.

A sonnet in which both lovers speak provides a unique opportunity for Juliet to resist the tropes of traditional love poetry. Gary Kuchar explains that "one of the great temptations of Petrarchism is to become wholly enamored with the image, or phantasm, of the beloved—thereby relinquishing any relationship with the actual lady herself."[40] A poem in which "the actual lady herself" speaks seems like the perfect antidote to the Petrarchan poison of such narcissistic fantasy. Though Romeo addresses Juliet as a shrine and a saint, Novy notes that Juliet "does not simply stand motionless on her pedestal: she talks back."[41] Albright also remarks on the unusualness of a sonnet in which the beloved woman can talk back to her lover. He explains a key difference between the meeting sonnet and conventional love sonnets: Whereas most sonnet sequences tend to become self-absorbed, in *Romeo and Juliet*, "the co-presence on stage of the two lovers becomes a sort of guarantee that there will be no immuring, no estrangement." That is, the sonnet-making itself cannot overshadow real interaction with the beloved this time, since the

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[39] Jill L. Levenson, "Introduction," *Romeo and Juliet,* ed. Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 27.
[40] Gary Kuchar, "Petrarchism and Repentance in John Donne's Holy Sonnets," *Modern Philology* 105 (2008): 543. Kuchar is arguing about how John Donne plays on Petrarchan convention in religious poetry. See also Whittier on this danger of Petrarchan narcissism. She argues that Romeo, as Rosaline's lover, is dangerously absorbed in the poetry and that he ignores Rosaline in the process: "Romeo probably fails to recognize the performative and potentially deadly power of poetry because he is so drawn to *its* beauty (not Rosaline's, whose specific physical qualities he scarcely mentions)" (Whittier 50).
[41] Novy, 102.

beloved is right there participating in the sonnet-making. Here, "[Juliet's] voice is as intimate, as edgy, as compelling as [Romeo's]." Normally, "In a sonnet sequence, the beloved is always outside the text—indeed, her outsideness is the chief premise of the text;"—that is, the Petrarchan poet admiringly complains that the lady is unattainable, and he writes poems because he cannot speak to her in person—"but in *Romeo and Juliet*, the lover and the beloved are both figments of words, on the same plane of discourse."[42] The mutuality of the meeting sonnet challenges Petrarchan love poetry's generic tendency to wallow in male speakers' psychology while objectifying women.

Because the beloved lady gets to speak parts of the sonnet in *Romeo and Juliet*, she does not become a passive object of discourse for the misogyny or the idealism of the male speaker to use however he wants in composing his poetry. To be more precise, I say that in the meeting sonnet Romeo and Juliet are each simultaneously poetic artificers and poetic artifices. They each craft the poetry, and in so doing, they mutually craft poetic identities for themselves—shrine, pilgrim, and saint—and negotiate the roles they will play in the miniature drama of the meeting sonnet. The way that Juliet and Romeo craft poetic roles together stands in stark contrast to the solipsism of a Petrarchan sonnet spoken only by the male lover and likely in the absence of the beloved woman.

### 3.4 Juliet's Negotiation of Sainthood in the Meeting Sonnet

While I agree with the chorus of scholars saying that the sonnet's mutuality is remarkable and that its dialogic form resists narcissistic Petrarchan tendencies, I also argue that the

[42] Albright, 50.

sonnet contains significant tension between the lovers and that Juliet not only resists the solipsism of Petrarchan form *by speaking* but also resists the spiritual aspiration of Petrarchan love by *what she says*. Some readers, while rightly amazed that Juliet speaks, have wrongly neglected the content of her lines in the sonnet. Juliet, I argue, works to improve Romeo's poetry and to modify his spiritual language in order to give herself a more human role in the poem. From the moment that Romeo casts her as a saint's shrine, Juliet works to resist and reshape the religious metaphors that Romeo applies to her. She is not sure that she wants to be the elevated object of Petrarchan and Neoplatonic spiritual love, and she uses her poetic skill to guide Romeo toward a more authentic and mutual kind of interaction with her.

Juliet's resistance, however, remains within the confines of the mutually created poem. She is participating in a delicately balanced game, and she is not willing to roughly contradict Romeo or to abandon the poetic constructions he begins. As Thomas Honegger points out, both Juliet and Romeo act on Castiglione's precept that lovers should feel each other's intentions out cautiously, using ambiguous language for their own feelings so that they have a dignified escape route in case things are not as they seem. Honegger further notes that by keeping Romeo's same metaphors in the poem and adapting them, Juliet exactly follows "Castiglione's recommendations for elegant courtly conversation."[43] By adapting Romeo's original metaphors instead of trying to start over when she wants to change the direction of the poem and modify her own role in it, Juliet shows her courtly proficiency in witty and affable interaction.

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[43] Thomas Honegger, "'Wouldst thou withdraw love's faithful vow?': The negotiation of love in the Orchard Scene (Romeo and Juliet Act II)," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 7, no. 1 (2006): 74.

Juliet's negotiations in the meeting sonnet are particularly delicate because she is always working on two interconnected levels: the level of the miniature poetic drama that she and Romeo are co-creating and the level of the social encounter with Romeo. On the level of the miniature play of the sonnet, Juliet manages the *dramatis personae* of saints and pilgrims and the metaphorical plot twists of pilgrimage and intercession—and everything in the miniature play has implications for the social encounter and her nascent relationship with Romeo. Likewise, on the level of the social encounter, Juliet's decisions about what to say and when to touch and whether to kiss also spill over to the poetic drama. Much of the tension in Juliet's lines comes from this delicate balance of interconnected poetic and relational concerns.

Romeo starts the poem with a bizarre set of metaphors that are much in need of Juliet's revision for both poetic and relational reasons. In Romeo's original construction, his hand, which we are forced to picture as some kind of sacrilegious tomb robber or else as a clumsy pilgrim, profanes the shrine, and his lips are additional characters, pilgrims waiting somewhere behind his hand:

> If I profane with my unworthiest hand
> This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,
> My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
> (1.4.206-9)

Romeo's piecemeal personification of his anatomy, though certainly clever, suffers from the Petrarchan blazon's tendency to combine images that prove weirdly incongruous

when examined too closely. Romeo inherits this self-fragmentation from Petrarch.[44] Stamm, reading from a theatrical perspective, argues that Romeo is simply too overwhelmed by his encounter with Juliet to speak coherently and "For a moment the old self-absorbed acolyte of the artificial cult of love asserts himself again in the narcissistic and almost grotesque comparison of his lips to two blushing pilgrims."[45] While I agree that Romeo's lines are poetically awkward because of their fragmentation, I also argue that Romeo's Petrarchism persists throughout the play, and these lines are not an isolated relapse. Lines like these are very much in character according to Edward Snow's analysis of Romeo's imaginative habits throughout the whole play. Snow claims that Romeo's imagery tends to be fragmentary, and that Romeo has trouble placing himself into his poetry coherently. Even when Romeo participates in the world he imagines, his "metaphors make him an object that remains separate from and unchanged by disembodied emotional forces acting on him from without." Romeo's imagination is "dominated by eyesight," and his poetic "perspectives...tend to make him an onlooker rather than a participant." (Note that while Snow considers an imagination "dominated by eyesight" to be harmfully limited, such fixation with the sense of sight above others is exactly what we should expect of a good Neoplatonic lover as described in *The Courtier*.) Snow claims that Juliet's "imaginative universe, in contrast to Romeo's, is generated by

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[44] See Petrarch, trans. Cooke, 84, a poem in which Petrarch's speaker has an argument with his own eyes. See also 6 and 47 (where the speaker's desire acts against his will); 21 (in which the speaker's heart is a separate character described in the third person); 49 (in which Petrarch's speaker scolds his personified tongue, tears, and sighs); 150 and 242 (dialogues between the speaker and his soul or heart); and 211 (in which the speaker attributes his motives to many virtues and vices at strife within him). The Latin title of Petrarch's collected love poems, *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (*Fragments of Common Things* or *Fragments in Ordinary Language*) reflects the fragmentary nature of both the verse and the speaker.

[45] Stamm, 9. See also 2-5 for a useful overview of early criticism on the meeting sonnet and 9-10 for a lovely reading of one way the sonnet can play out on stage.

all the senses, and by a unity of feeling that is more than just the sum of their parts."[46] Snow is not talking about the meeting sonnet here, but his analysis perfectly describes Romeo's first lines and Juliet's in the sonnet. Romeo begins with a fragmented set of visual images that displace his own identity—hands profane a shrine and lips could re-hallow it, but Romeo obfuscates his own place and character in the dramatic situation of the poem.

The aesthetic problem of Romeo's grotesque fragmentation is closely related to its relational problem. In his initial image, Romeo is not a whole and present person who can express his wishes to Juliet. He is talking about the actions of his hand (touching Juliet) and the potential actions of his lips (kissing her) as dramatic movements by separate characters rather than actions that he, Romeo, can choose to take. Such a fragmented identity, in which Romeo is incapable of telling Juliet how he feels or asking her for what he wants, may work for a Petrarchan sonneteer dissecting his own psyche in private, but it is entirely inappropriate for a lover trying to begin a relationship with a woman who can hear him and can answer him. Romeo's fragmentation is an even more serious error relationally than it is poetically.

Juliet counters on both levels by integrating Romeo into a single character. She resists Romeo's stylized Petrarchan discourse because his language is not just in need of poetic revision but is also a hindrance to emotionally mature interaction between the two of them. Her first two words to Romeo clear up the fragmented mess he has made: "Good pilgrim" (1.4.210). With that, she deftly consolidates Romeo into a single pilgrim. She

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[46] Edward Snow, "Language and Sexual Difference in Romeo and Juliet" in *Shakespeare's 'Rough Magic': Renaissance Essays in Honor of C.L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppelia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 171, 173.

makes this relationally necessary revision while remaining in the poetic world of Petrarch, who also represents the lover as a pilgrim. In one sonnet, Petrarch's speaker compares his own quest to see the image of his lady everywhere with an old man's final pilgrimage to Rome to gaze on a sacred image of Christ. Elsewhere, he describes the spiritual experience of seeing his lady Laura as an out-of-body experience that sends the soul on a pilgrimage:

> L'aura che 'l verde lauro et l'aureo crine
> soavamente sospirando move,
> fa con sue viste leggiadrette et nove
> l'anime da' lor corpi pellegrine.
>
> (The breeze that sways the verdant laurel, and
> That gently sighing, stirs those golden locks,
> With rare, alluring glimpses makes souls go
> Out from their bodies, pilgrim wanderers.)[47]

By addressing Romeo as a pilgrim, Juliet preserves the Petrarchan tone of the poem Romeo began, but she rejects the fragmented character he first presented. Unifying Romeo into one pilgrim not only redirects him toward more tenable poetic images, but it reframes the terms of their dialogue relationally. Now that Romeo is pictured as a whole person and not able to blame his hands for doing things on their own, Juliet and Romeo can attempt to interact as adults.

Juliet's lines simultaneously restrain and encourage Romeo so that she can draw him on to further dialogue without physical escalation. Juliet is not satisfied with Romeo's roundabout way of asking for a kiss by implying that his lips must re-hallow a shrine that his hand has desecrated. In order to delay the kiss and promote more and

[47] Petrarch trans. Cooke, 16 and 246.1-4. In poem 16, the translator's note (p. 420) identifies the image of Christ sought in Rome as the Veronica, a miraculous depiction of Christ's face on a handkerchief. In poem 246, Petrarch puns on Laura, the name of the lady, in *l'aura* (breeze), *lauro* (laurel), and *l'aureo* (golden).

better conversation, she picks up on another interactive angle of Romeo's shrine scene in her responding quatrain: Romeo does not need to call his hand unworthy (or atone for its wrongs with a kiss) because "Saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch" (1.4.212). It is a brilliant move in the course of the sonnet's banter, because she can at the same time elevate Romeo (to encourage the interaction to continue) and decline his kiss (to maintain her own boundaries). If she is a saint and he is a pilgrim, and if saints' hands touch pilgrims' hands, then the two can continue to interact with no need to involve Romeo's lips just yet. Juliet's line gives her time to evaluate Romeo without rashly accepting or rashly declining his advances, and it shows her improvisational skill in the word game they are playing.

But Juliet's quatrain does more than refine Romeo's poetic style and adeptly manage the social situation at hand: She also tries to modify the content of Romeo's spiritual metaphor. As she unifies Romeo into a single pilgrim, she also re-negotiates her own place in the spiritual schema of the poem:

> Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
> For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
> And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.
> (1.4.210-13)

Romeo first called Juliet's body a "holy shrine" (1.4.207); she now works to become a person rather than a piece of sacred furniture. In order to keep from blatantly contradicting Romeo or rupturing the poem he has begun, she works incrementally. She takes the transformation one step at a time, and so her lines contain two separate representations of herself. First, she moves away from the shrine and plays the saint to Romeo's pilgrim: "For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch." Her move to the

role of a saint is a gentle and poetically smooth one because a shrine might house a saint's relics and honor the saint's life, and so Juliet can easily slide her poetic persona from the shrine to the saint by metonymy. Yet this modification is important because being a saint allows Juliet to interact with Romeo in ways that a shrine could not. A shrine is a passive object, but a saint intercedes on behalf of pilgrims. Juliet, though, does not intend to remain in the role of the saint. She takes the humanizing process even further in the next line: "And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss." This is a separate image from the previous line's. Now instead of a pilgrim addressing a saint, we see two pilgrims—palmers—greeting one another. Juliet has transformed herself from a shrine to a saint to a living fellow pilgrim. Gradually, within the given parameters of the poem, Juliet works toward an image of herself as someone who can interact with Romeo, and interact as an equal.

However, Juliet's middle step, "Saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch," brings added complications because, even just for a moment, it casts Juliet as a saint—and the problem with being a saint is that saints have to be dead. Thus Juliet herself, during the joyous moment of the meeting sonnet, implies her own death, which will come true at the ending of the play. Or rather, by casting herself as a saint, Juliet clarifies the implication of death that Romeo had begun in a vague way with the "holy shrine." Whittier points out that Juliet's death is already implied in Romeo's lines because "Scripturally the body is a temple, but in order for hers to be a shrine, Juliet must first die (this is the prerequisite to canonization)."[48] Whittier sees the implication of death in Romeo's image of the shrine but does not pursue its continuance with Juliet's substitution

[48] Whittier, 54.

of the saint, nor does she read Juliet's canny resistance to both poetic fragmentation and implied death. Juliet momentarily casts herself as a saint because a saint is more human and more capable of interaction than a shrine; however, the saint image brings Juliet's prerequisite death into clearer focus because while the shrine is a material monument, neither alive nor dead, the saint is a person who was once alive and is now dead. Ironically, while Juliet is trying to make herself more alive and more human in the collaborative poem, she temporarily casts herself as a *dead* human.

Here, it would simplify matters if living people of faith or virtue could be classified as saints—when saints touch the hands of pilgrims, they could simply be living holy people greeting visitors. Indeed, the Protestant usage of the term saint to mean a living Christian is entirely plausible in England in the 1590s.[49] However, such a general usage does not cohere with the particular way in which the sainthood motif is used in the lovers' exchange and the Catholic setting of Verona. The sort of saint who has a shrine, is visited by pilgrims, and grants prayers is not just any living Christian—she is a Catholic saint, already dead and canonized. Though a saint can be alive in contemporary usage of the word, the particular saint in this poem cannot be alive; this saint, whose hands touch pilgrims' hands, must be dead.

The deadness of the saint is particularly inescapable in the meeting sonnet because Juliet calls herself a saint and insists on her own physicality in the very same

[49] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *saint* can mean "In biblical use, one of God's chosen people; in the New Testament, one of the elect under the New Covenant; a member of the Christian church; a Christian." The OED gives examples of this sense of the word in Wycliffe's and Tyndale's translations of the Bible, as well as in Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (published in 1597), which mentions "The fellowship of [God's] Saincts in this present world." "Saint, adj. and n." *OED Online*. September 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/view/Entry/169847?rskey=dkNmR7&result=1 .

line: By mentioning the hand that can touch Romeo's hand, Juliet makes the *body* of the saint present. Because saints' hands touch pilgrims' hands, the saint cannot be only spiritual, existing in heaven or not constrained by place, but must have a physical body that exists specifically in the presence of the pilgrim. Insisting on her own physicality is perfectly in line with Juliet's goals in the poem: She wants to be able to interact more meaningfully with Romeo, and she wants to protect herself by maintaining some control over the interaction. Saying "Saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch" allows her to do both of those things. She has made the interaction more meaningful and mutual by making herself a saint (a human with a soul and a mind) rather than a shrine (inanimate, passive furniture) and by positing that the saint can touch Romeo. She also retains cautious control by keeping the interaction to hands for the moment, though Romeo was ready to rush right to lips before she even spoke. On a relational level, the line does exactly what it is meant to do, delaying the kiss, enabling mutual interaction, and making Romeo acknowledge Juliet as a progressively more human figure. However, the idea that "saints have hands" and its implication of saints' bodies comes with serious difficulties on the level of the poetic drama that the lovers are mutually constructing.

If a pilgrim touches a dead saint's hand, there are at least two distinct possibilities for what he might be doing: The pilgrim could be touching an icon—a statue or painting of a saint—, or the pilgrim could be touching the preserved remains of the saint's hand in

a reliquary.[50] The kind of saint Juliet and Romeo are talking about together has to be dead, so we cannot (exclusively) be talking about a living holy person who can interact with another living person. And if the pilgrim can touch hands with the saint, then we also cannot be talking (exclusively) about her soul, which departs from the physical body at death. If, then, the saint is dead and the pilgrim and the saint can touch hands, we are probably to imagine that the pilgrim is either touching an icon or a corpse. This is poetry, and we do not need to choose one reading to the exclusion of all others—all of the above readings are relevant to Juliet and Romeo's encounter—but the icon and relic readings, because they foreground the physicality of the saint and her death at the same time, cohere particularly well with the language of the sonnet and remain fruitful throughout the final scenes of the play.

Imagining an icon provides a beautiful image: The pilgrim, on arriving at the holy site, reaches out to touch the outstretched hand of the saint's statue.[51] Francois Laroque reads the saint language in the meeting sonnet this way: "In these images, Juliet metaphorically appears as the statue of some virgin saint which [Romeo] has come to adore, so that Marian or Roman idolatry is here transposed to the fields of profane love

[50] Historically, it would be highly unlikely for a medieval or early modern pilgrim to touch the bodily remains of a saint; the pilgrim would probably not even be able to see them because they would be fully enclosed in a reliquary. See Malo, 4-17 on the containment of relics in reliquaries and its ideological significance. However, poetry often fantasizes about activities that are not common practices or even about activities that are impossible, so the historical implausibility of a pilgrim in real life touching any part of a saint's corpse does not rule out this reading as alien to Shakespeare's intentions or early audiences' interpretations of the words. A pilgrim could certainly *imagine* touching the bones of the saint, and the sonnet is a flexible world of fantasies.

[51] The term *icon* can refer to either to statues of saints prevalent in medieval and early modern Catholicism or to portraits of saints venerated in medieval through contemporary Orthodox Christianity. See the attestations for sense 1b and sense 2 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry for "icon."

and dramatic lyric."[52] Romeo can touch the statue's hand as an act of devotion to the saint. This reading is admittedly oblique given Juliet's phrasing, "saints have hands," because it is ambiguous in what sense a saint *has* the hand of her icon. The image of the saint is not the saint herself, and its hands are not hers in an ordinary way. Yet if the saint is present in her icon and devotees can approach her by touching it, then in some sense its hands are hers, and the saint and the pilgrim would both experience the touch when the pilgrim touches the icon's hand. The icon reading overall makes for a plausible image, reverent and visually lovely, but also eerie. Even though the statue is beautiful and the pilgrim's desire to touch its hand is a poignant sentiment of devotion, the statue only exists because the person whom it represents has died.

Alternatively, the pilgrim in the meeting sonnet could touch the literal hand of the saint, which has been preserved as a relic. This second option for reading the metaphor brings to mind the saint's deadness even more overtly. The image of a pilgrim fingering skeletal or mummified saint's digits in a reliquary brings a serious element of creepiness to the meeting sonnet's beautifully lyrical love scene, foreboding the immanent death of Juliet. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the icon reading foreshadows the building of the statuary monuments to Juliet and Romeo in the last act, and the corpse reading foreshadows the death scenes in the tomb.

In both the icon reading and the relic reading, physicality foregrounds the trouble spot: The saint is dead. If the poem described a spiritual encounter with a spiritual saint in heavenly space, such as Dante's encounter with Beatrice in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*,

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[52] Francois Laroque, "The Cult of Saints Revisited: Shakespeare's Martyrs of Love," *Cahiers Elisabethains* 73 (2008): 25.

then perhaps the fact of the saint's death would not be so jarring. When Dante first sees Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory, he feels "the mighty power of old love," and declares, "I am left with less / than one drop of my blood that does not tremble: / I recognize the signs of the old flame."[53] Dante the pilgrim experiences the same physically overwhelming love for the sainted, dead Beatrice as he did for Beatrice when she was alive. Yet in the meeting sonnet, the encounter between pilgrim and saint takes place on earth with the touching of hands, and we are not allowed to ignore the saint's death. If we picture the pilgrim touching a statuary icon, the physicality of the statue is a reminder of its separateness from the departed and beatified soul of the saint. If we picture the pilgrim touching a corpse, deadness is also apparent—a relic is, etymologically, what is *left behind* when the real saint, the saint's soul, departs from the body. Being a saint means being dead, and being a saint who can be touched emphasizes that death because the physical encounter of touch requires a body (whether an artificial one or the actual remains of the saint), and this touchable body is not the home of the saint's soul.

This separation which implies death is not what Juliet wants, and Juliet tries to move forward through the saint image toward greater mutuality. When Juliet says, "For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch," she means it as merely an intermediate step to get her from Romeo's inanimate "shrine" to her own preferred role of a companion pilgrim in "palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss." She intends the persona of

[53] Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, *Purgatorio* 30.39, 45-47. Note, however, that Beatrice rebukes Dante for clinging to earthly perspectives.

saint only as a transitional image, and she tries instead to claim a living human persona for herself as a fellow pilgrim who can walk with Romeo and greet him as an equal.

However, Romeo pursues the earlier line, replying to Juliet as a saint and not as a companion pilgrim; though Juliet's sainthood is more full of troubling implications of death and though it is not Juliet's intended destination, casting her as a saint is a better fit for the style of poetry in which Romeo first begins to express spiritual devotion to Juliet. Choosing to remain on more familiar, Petrarchan ground, Romeo responds to "Saints have hands" rather than to "holy palmers' kiss," eventually insisting on Juliet's sainthood. Notably, while Petrarch's speaker often expresses spiritual awe toward his lady throughout the poetic sequence, he describes her in explicitly saintly terms only in the poems set after her death.[54] Romeo, however, chooses to see Juliet as a saint rather than a palmer even though she is standing in front of him alive. Romeo is not keeping up with the poetic trajectory Juliet has set, and instead of accepting her companionship as a fellow pilgrim who can journey with him and greet him by touching her own *living* hand to his, he fixes on the more conventional image of the Petrarchan beloved woman as a saint.

And yet, Romeo does not mitigate the problem of the saint's dead body—in fact, he further insists on a physical sainthood in his reply. "Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?" he asks in yet another indirect push for a kiss (1.4.214). So we still have the problem that the saint's body is dead, and the physical implications are made even more uncomfortable because now Romeo is thinking of kissing that body rather than just

[54] See Petrarch, trans. Cook, 325 (where Fortuna tells of the lady's saintly nativity and life), 341 (where a Beatrice-esque Laura comforts the speaker from heaven), 346 (the apotheosis of Laura; she ascends to heaven immediately at her death and angels and saints behold her with awe), and 348 (where the speaker hopes that she will intercede for him in heaven).

touching it hand to hand. In the immediate context, Romeo's "Let lips do what hands do" is not a likely next step if both lovers are really thinking about corpses, however holy the corpses might be. Romeo is a rapturous lover at this stage and not (at least not yet) a morbid figure like Hamlet who ponders kisses from skulls. Hamlet says of Yorick's skull, "Here hung those lips that I have kiss'd I know not how oft." It is disruptive to read Juliet as another skull to be picked up now, while Romeo is still trying to wheedle a kiss out of her.[55] Within the exchange, the relic corpse reading is jarring, and though it resonates strongly with the end of the play, it is probably not what the lovers have in mind at the time.

Perhaps instead Romeo is thinking of kissing the lips of the statuary icon. This image is far less morbid, but it is still disturbing in a particularly Petrarchan way because a statue stands unmoving and does not physically return the kiss—the pilgrim-lover, though he has theoretically exalted his saint-beloved, kisses her without reference to her own volition.[56] In a sonnet about the artist Simon, who painted Laura's portrait, Petrarch illuminates the problem of how artistic and poetic representations of a woman are disconnected from her will:

> Quando giunse a Simon l'alto concetto
> ch'a mio nome gli pose in man lo stile,
> s' avesse dato a l'opera gentile
> colla figura voce et intellect,

[55] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2009), 5.1.174-175. Also there is "My Lady Worm's [skull], chapless, and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade" at 5.1.96-97.

[56] Saints' statues were sometimes believed to move miraculously in response to extraordinary devotion (see Shell 62, discussed later), but for a Shakespearean take on the moving statue, see the ending of *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), in which Hermione's statuary monument appears to come alive. Here, Hermione's husband Leontes is not permitted to kiss her until after she is revealed as living and can move toward him to show her willingness to touch him. Furthermore, she speaks not at Leontes' kiss but at the intercession of her daughter, Perdita (5.3.75-128).

di sospir' molti mi sgombrava il petto,
che ciò ch'altri à piú caro, a me fan vile:
però che 'n vista ella si monstra humile
promettendomi pace ne l'aspetto.
Ma poi ch'i' vengo a ragionar co·llei,
benignamente assai par che m'ascolte,
se risponder savesse a' detti miei.

(Simone, when he found that high conceit,
Took pencil in his hand on my behalf;
But had he given to that noble work,
Along with shape, both voice and intellect,
My breast would be relieved of many sighs
That make whatever others hold most dear
Seem base to me; for in her picture she
Seems meek, and her face promises me peace.
But when I come to hold discourse with her,
She heeds me with great kindness, so it seems,
If only she could answer to my words.)[57]

The painted image of Laura is beautiful and has the added benefit that it does not reject the speaker's advances like the real Laura does, but hears him humbly without objection. However, the speaker is disquieted by the fact that the image cannot respond to him at all. The problem with the painting also applies to Petrarch's and Romeo's representations of women in poetry—the male poets can enjoy beauty and fabricate acquiescence, all

[57] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 78.1-11. The sonnet ends with an ambiguous reference to Pygmalion, the sculptor in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who carves an image of a perfect woman and then has it come to life in order to be his wife:

Pigmalion, quanto lodar ti dêi
de l'imagine tua, se mille volte
n'avesti quell ch'i' sol una vorrei.

(Pygmalion, how you ought to give yourself
Praise for your image, if you had from it
A thousand times what I desire just once.)

It is ominously unclear whether the thing Pygmalion had from his image and the speaker wants from the image of Laura is intelligent discourse (in keeping with the previous lines) or sex with the mindless image (because the statue-turned-woman's speech is not reported in Ovid, while Pygmalion's intercourse with her is).

without reference to the women's desires. If Romeo is imagining Juliet as a statue, he is again making her a passive object when she wants to be a living person.

Furthermore, by calling Juliet a saint and simultaneously pressing to kiss her, Romeo is acting presumptuously within Castiglione's model of spiritual love. Romeo is trying to have it both ways by seeking spiritual enlightenment through Juliet and also ardently desiring physical contact with her. Whittier notes the paradox of Romeo's spiritual language and physical intent: "even here, while seeming to elevate it to a religious mystery, the poetic word actually deals on behalf of the flesh."[58] That is, all of Romeo's spiritualized language is directed toward the carnal goal of a kiss. In *The Courtier*, Bembo warns that the beauty that elevates a lover's spirit must be enjoyed through "the faculty of sight," not "the sense of touch."[59] Romeo, as discussed above, plans to touch Juliet as soon as he sees her, and both in his first quatrain and in his reply to Juliet, he is urging her toward the more intimate physical contact of a kiss. Castiglione's discussants disagree about whether spiritual love should involve kisses, and Bembo makes some fine distinctions on the subject. In the case of lovers who are not spiritual enough, Bembo says, a kiss is precarious: "For since a kiss is the union of body and soul, there is danger that the sensual lover may incline more in the direction of the body than in that of the soul." An imperfect lover may find the physical element of the kiss overwhelming and forget about spiritual enlightenment. However, Bembo says that a spiritual lover, whose allegiance to the soul above the body is unshaken, may kiss chastely to unite his soul with that of his beloved. Such a spiritual lover knows that

[58] Whittier, 55.
[59] Castiglione, 251.

"although the mouth is part of the body, nevertheless it emits words, which are the interpreters of the soul," and in a kiss, the two lovers' souls "mingle so together that each of them has two souls; and a single soul, composed thus of these two, rules as it were over two bodies."[60] According to Bembo, the right kind of lover can experience a kiss as an enlightening spiritual union, but for the wrong kind of lover, a kiss is dangerously carnal.

As I read the meeting sonnet, Romeo is genuinely awestruck, and his spiritual address to Juliet is not mere lustful flattery—however, Romeo is a novice in this sort of love, and sincerity of feeling is not enough to meet Bembo's high standards for the kind of lover who can kiss spiritually rather than carnally. The spiritual lover's soul, Bembo says, already "has departed from vice and is purged by the study of true philosophy and is given to a spiritual life and is practiced in the things of the intellect" when it begins its ascent to the divine enlightenment of love.[61] No matter how genuine his sense of revelation at meeting Juliet, it is too much to expect that Romeo achieves such rigorous discipline immediately. Romeo has certainly been a carnal lover in his pursuit of Rosaline—he whines that Rosaline has committed to chastity and will not perpetuate her beauty in the world by procreating with him, despite his love speeches and offers of money (1.1.204-220). Though Romeo's approach to Juliet is less crassly lustful than his unsuccessful affair with Rosaline, Romeo has hardly had time to become the kind of perfected spiritual lover Bembo is describing, for whom a kiss means only the mingling of souls.

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[60] Castiglione, 253.
[61] Castiglione, 256.

Juliet, for her part, is not ready for a kiss and not satisfied with the sidelong way that Romeo is asking for one, and she prepares a way for the lovers to continue their interaction with more direct and intimate speech instead of closer physical contact. Juliet counters Romeo's push toward a kiss ("Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?") with an alternative use for lips: "Aye, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer" (1.4.215). She wants Romeo to keep *talking* to her, and she is not going to give him a kiss just because he tried to edge her into it with a rhetorical question. By using their lips to speak prayers rather than to kiss, the lovers stay safely in the spiritual realm, their mouths "emit[ting] words, which are the interpreters of the soul."[62] Because of this turn Juliet has given the poem, Juliet and Romeo can continue to interact through speech and not rush into the risks of more intimate physical contact.

Juliet's line not only holds off the kiss again and prolongs the lovers' spoken conversation on the level of the social encounter, but on the level of the poetic drama, it also introduces a way that saints and pilgrims specifically can be alike and have interactions together: prayer. Both saints and pilgrims pray—the saints intercede to God for the needs of the living, and pilgrims journey to shrines partly in order to pray better by experiencing the holy spaces and holy objects that draw them closer to saints. So even though Romeo does not allow Juliet to demote herself to the status of a fellow pilgrim, the pilgrim and the saint in the miniature drama become less vastly separated creatures if both of them are doing the same thing by praying. The pilgrim prays for the saint's assistance and the saint prays to God on behalf of the pilgrim. Prayer thus restores the possibility that the saint and the pilgrim could continue to interact through words rather

[62] Castiglione, 253.

than closer physical contact if the pilgrim addresses his prayers to the saint and the saint responds with more prayer on his behalf.[63]

Now that Juliet has suggested prayer as a way for the pilgrim to communicate with the saint, her role as saint is no longer a barrier to interaction, and indeed, Romeo communicates with Juliet more openly here than he ever has before. Romeo can now ask directly to be allowed a kiss rather than personifying his lips as characters who need to come and re-hallow a profaned shrine: "O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do; / They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair" (1.4.217). Romeo addresses Juliet as a saint, and saints are dead. That is a serious problem for Juliet, for their relationship, and for the concept of spiritual ascent through love, as I have discussed above and will discuss further below. However, it is also important to recognize that here, in contrast to his opening quatrain, *Romeo addresses Juliet*. The "holy shrine" with which Romeo identified Juliet at first is not only a piece of inanimate furniture; it is also in the third person. Now, in response to Juliet's poetic and relational guidance, Romeo is saying *thou*. For the first time, he speaks directly to Juliet and tells her what he wants.

Juliet has been working toward this moment throughout the whole sonnet, guiding Romeo toward more open and more human interactions with her, and accordingly, as soon as Romeo addresses her as *thou* and makes a direct petition to her, Juliet agrees to let Romeo have what he asks. She will stand still and allow him a kiss: "Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake" (1.4.218). She grants him the kiss he has wanted all along "for prayers' sake"—that is, because he has finally *asked* her for it. Romeo's

[63] However, we should also note that Juliet does not quite admit to being a saint here—she says that Romeo is a pilgrim and that both the saints and the palmers he has mentioned use their lips to pray, but she does not yet identify which of them she is.

first quatrain figured neither Juliet nor himself as a whole human person, and he implied sidelong that the kiss needed to happen for dubious metaphorical reasons, so that his lips could amend for the profanation his "rough hand" had committed on the "holy shrine." His next line, "Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?" was a rhetorical question, again with the sidelong implication that the saint (Juliet) and the palmer (Romeo) ought to be using those lips that they both have for kissing one another. In neither of these speeches did he actually ask Juliet for a kiss. Juliet, therefore, puts off the kiss and requires Romeo to continue speaking until he finally speaks correctly by addressing her directly and asking her to permit a kiss. So far as the relationship goes, Juliet's poetry is doing what she wants it to do: It brings Romeo to treat her as a whole human person and make his plea directly to her.

But again, while the poem is going where Juliet wants it to go on a relational level, the implications of the saint metaphor continue to develop their own troubling complexities in the poetic drama. With the line "Saints do not move though grant for prayers' sake," Juliet finally accepts her role as a saint in the poem—she does not try again to re-cast herself as a fellow pilgrim. Juliet is able to accept the part now because she and Romeo have re-defined the concept of her sainthood in the course of the poem so that sainthood is more compatible with volition and mature interaction through prayer. When Juliet speaks of saints granting prayers and Romeo responds in kind, they move from the earlier idea of a saint's material image on earth to the metaphor of a saint's soul in heaven. It is the saint's soul, not the dead body or the icon, that lives in the presence of God and intercedes for living mortals through prayer. The saint's body is still on earth and will only be united with the soul at judgment day, and the saint's icon, though it

enjoys a metaphysical connection with the saint, is on earth and made of earthly materials. Though the pilgrim's prayers and the saint's responses may be focused through these earthly objects, the pilgrim's prayer is addressed to the soul of the saint, which is in heaven and (until judgment day) separate from the material body. And yet, because Romeo and Juliet touch and kiss, the saint's bodily presence cannot disappear entirely.

The saint in the poem, then, has to be *both* spiritual and physical, and we can read Juliet's final line in the sonnet very differently depending on whether we emphasize the spiritual saint or the physical saint. If we think of the saint's soul—as Juliet and Romeo are probably doing—then "Saints do not move" because they are immortals above the mutability of the world; they are no longer sublunary, no longer below the moon's sphere and subject to change from their proper courses. But if we think of the saint's body—and it is also necessary to think of the body because hands and lips touch in the sonnet—then saints do not move simply because they are dead. In the poems set after Laura's death, Petrarch emphasizes the disjunction between the lady's body under the earth and her soul in heaven.[64] This same dichotomy between body and soul is apparent while Juliet is still alive, and it foreshadows her death. Juliet's attempt to integrate herself as a whole person in the poem has unraveled at a key seam, because now that she is a saint, the tone of her final line in the sonnet shifts dramatically depending on whether we are talking about her soul or her body.

If when we read the line, "Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake," we are thinking about her soul, then all's well; the saint's soul remains joyous in the heavenly spheres above the erratic movement here below, and Romeo's movement

[64] See Petrarch, trans. Cook 297, 319, and 333.

toward her to take a kiss is his own movement toward his own sainthood, a spiritual revelation embodied in a physical kiss. In that case, this encounter is working just as Castiglione says it should work, and Romeo elevates his own soul by pursuing Juliet's physical beauty. Romeo, then, experiences Juliet as a spiritual being, and in doing so, he becomes more spiritual himself and approaches the vision of transcendent, divine beauty. Romeo desires and chooses Juliet's radiant soul, and his "will feeds only upon spiritual good." The spiritual lover's kiss, too, "is the opening of mutual access to [the two lovers'] souls," a way for Romeo to encounter Juliet's saintly spirit, commune with her, and come closer to his own transcendent vision.[65] Romeo takes a step closer to sainthood when he steps up to kiss Juliet, whose unmoving saintly soul does not come down to him.

However, the line also contains the possibility that we think instead of the saint's unmoving corpse. Indeed, the physicality on which the lovers have both insisted requires that we do think of the saint's body: "Saints have hands," says Juliet. "Have not saints lips?" asks Romeo. While the lovers are working in a poetic framework of spiritualized love, they also intensely desire one another physically and thus can never leave bodies out of the equation for long.

This necessary alternate reading in which Romeo kisses the unmoving body of the dead saint brings us back to the worst possibility of the Petrarchan sonnet world: The poem kills and embalms the beloved woman in verse. The female beloved becomes entirely passive before the imaginary advances of her male poet lover; she cannot move away if he wants to kiss her, but she cannot move to return his affection of her own will

[65] Castiglione, 243, 253. The court lady Emilia Pia also says that the lover must conform his own wishes to his beloved's and "transform himself into the soul of his beloved" (Castiglione 197). In a way, Romeo has done this by adapting his metaphors and style of address at Juliet's prompting.

either. His spiritual quests and psychological processes overshadow her volition. This kind of textual necrophilia is precisely what Albright thinks *Romeo and Juliet* has avoided by having a sonnet in which both lovers speak. This sonnet's "co-presence on the stage of the two lovers," Albright claims, "becomes a sort of guarantee that there will be no immuring, no estrangement."[66] In part, Albright is correct: Juliet is present to challenge Romeo when he is about to idealize the humanity out of her, and a triumphant reading of mutual spiritual ascent in the sonnet is possible. However, the final couplet is ambiguous and also presents the possibility that what can go wrong with love poetry has gone wrong—that the sonnet has entombed Juliet as an unmoving corpse.

When Romeo finally moves toward Juliet to claim the kiss with the line, "Then move not while my prayer's effect I take" (1.4.219), Juliet is a saint who has granted his prayer. Romeo's movement toward Juliet may mean the beginning of his heavenward ascent as a spiritual lover. Juliet's corresponding stillness, however, is more sinister. In some ways, Juliet has gotten what she wanted out of this encounter—she speaks with Romeo, and under her poetic guidance, Romeo speaks directly to her and makes his request. She negotiates a speaking role for herself in their mutual poem and lays the groundwork for meaningful interaction with Romeo. Thus both on the level of the co-created poetic drama and on the level of the social encounter with Romeo, Juliet's careful balancing act goes well. And yet, Juliet does not quite get the role that she wants. At the end of the poem, she is not Romeo's fellow pilgrim, but a saint. Juliet began by integrating Romeo's lips and hands into a single "good pilgrim," but in the end, she plays the role of a saint whose living soul and dead body are ominously divided. Even as Juliet

[66] Albright, 50.

continues to negotiate her own identity and her relationship with Romeo, the deadly implications of her sainthood will echo throughout the play.

### 3.5 Religious Implications of Juliet's Sainthood

In Shakespeare's England, the discourse about sainthood in the meeting sonnet would have complex effects on audiences because the veneration of saints is part of a Catholic heritage regarded differently by different people under an officially Protestant regime. Attention to this complexity is needed in order to understand how religious language in the play, particularly around Juliet's sainthood, works. However, I will not make claims here about Shakespeare's own religious beliefs. Amid the critical controversy in which some argue that Shakespeare was a staunch and sincere Protestant, others that he was a angst-ridden Crypto-Catholic, and others that he was agnostic at heart and loyal to no religious system, Beatrice Groves takes what I think is a sensible approach to reading religion in Shakespeare's plays. Groves "attempts to engage with the religious nuances in Shakespeare's plays in a less sectarian manner" than that of critics who argue about what religious beliefs Shakespeare held. She acknowledges that "Shakespeare's dramaturgy includes traces of Catholicism's visual emphasis but it also embraces the rich verbal stimulus of Protestantism's focus on the Word."[67] Shell similarly sees Shakespeare as someone "whose language is saturated in religious discourse and whose dramaturgy is highly attentive to religious precedent, but whose invariable practice is to subordinate

[67] Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare 1592-1604* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), vii.

religious matter to the particular demands of the work at hand."[68] By considering religious elements in the plays one at a time and prioritizing questions about their function within the drama over the project of a forensic case for Shakespeare's own beliefs, scholars like Groves and Shell bring nuanced readings to the plays and avoid overinvestment in claims for which we lack evidence. *Romeo and Juliet* is particularly rich in religious elements and particularly in need of such nuanced reading.

Some, however, have argued that though the setting of the play is nominally Christian, Shakespeare downplays religion. Albright claims that Shakespeare makes Christianity relatively absent in order to keep from placing Christian moral judgments on the main characters. "It is likely that Shakespeare did not want the Christian religion to appear in this play in any sort of harsh or austere form, since, by Christian accounts, Romeo and Juliet are guilty of grave sins," Albright argues. Because Christian morality might condemn the lovers, "if Shakespeare wished to retain the audience's sympathy, he had to transpose the lovers' crimes to the classical and pagan sin of immoderate behavior." Here, fate and fortune are prominent and "a Christian God has little role to play."[69] And indeed, the play begins with dire prognostications about the "fatal loins" of the opposing houses and the doom of the "star-crossed lovers" (P.5-6), and even Friar Laurence, ostensibly a priest of the Catholic church, has more to say about caution and moderation than about chastity or piety (2.5.9-15). However, censorship of the theater, rather than a lack of interest in religious themes on Shakespeare's part, can also explain

[68]Shell, 3. See also 18. Shell is more inclined than I am to see Shakespeare's religious pastiche as an indication that he is not personally invested in religion. I think it is possible (but not necessary) that Shakespeare could have believed strongly in a form of Christianity and still played freely with various forms of it. Nevertheless, Shell devotes her analysis to better understanding how religion is used in the plays rather than to making a case for Shakespeare's non-religion.

[69] Albright, 43.

the obliqueness of religious references in many of the plays.[70] While the historical situation of censorship is not an excuse to read religious meanings everywhere indiscriminately, it does mean that indirect and undeveloped religious content should not be dismissed. Juliet's poetic sainthood and Romeo's continued references to angels and miracles, the prominence of the Friar as a failed moral authority, Juliet's religious angst about betraying Romeo (3.5.205-208), and the implications of resurrection in the tomb scene all indicate an interest in religion and spirituality in the play.[71] Though many of the religious references in the play are oblique, I contend that the play is both spiritual and religious, following the lovers' spiritual explorations and playing on particular church controversies of the time.

*Romeo and Juliet*, set in an apparently Catholic Verona but performed in an officially Protestant England, specifically plays on audiences' layered reactions to Catholic devotion and the veneration of saints. When Romeo calls Juliet a saint, he could be affronting Protestant and Crypto-Catholic audience members for different reasons. Anti-Catholic viewers could object to the veneration of saints categorically and hold that it should not be depicted on stage even in the re-appropriated manner of Juliet and Romeo's encounter. Catholic-sympathizing viewers could object to that very appropriation of sacred language and devotional practices for the purposes of wooing a lady. As Shell explains, "The sonnet's language of veneration is open to criticism on two fronts: evoking idolatry towards saints and comparing one's mistress to a saint."[72] Shell

[70] See Shell, 21 and 55-58 on Elizabethan religious censorship of the theater and the artistic and doctrinal implications of censorship.
[71] On the references to Christ's tomb in the Capulet tomb scene, see Chapter 4, 171-173.
[72] Shell, 61.

reads the meeting sonnet as a deliberate flirtation with the religious ambivalences of Shakespeare's time and place:

> There are moments in this passage where, despite the play's Italian setting, we find ourselves transported to post-Reformation England. A line like Juliet's 'Saints do not move' is a slightly odd one if we read it literal-mindedly as coming from a native of Italy, a country where, then and now, supposedly miraculous statues are commonplace. Shakespeare's Protestant contemporaries heartily disapproved of these claims, believing that they encouraged idolatry and lined the Church's pocket by means of the cults they stimulated. So 'Saints do not move' is a line which gives a nod towards polemical exchanges between Catholic and Protestant, and seems to be tending towards the Protestant view; yet the very next phrase 'though grant for prayer's sake,' shifts one right back into a Catholic world-view where saints, as well as God, respond to intercessions.[73]

These lines about sainthood—like the dead king's purgatorial ghost in *Hamlet*—would cause audience members to oscillate between Catholic and Protestant frameworks of interpretation.[74]

Such moments of oscillation heighten the scene's religious tension, yet they never fully take the meeting sonnet's saint into a Protestant framework where she can be a living person. She remains the object of a pilgrimage, to whom prayers are directed. At the time of the meeting sonnet, Juliet is a living woman whom Romeo loves, but her saint

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[73] Shell, 61-62.

[74] However, in addition to Protestantism and Catholicism, some critics have identified a third distinct religious tradition at play in Romeo and Juliet: the religion of love. Paul N. Siegel, "Christianity and the Religion of Love in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1961): 371-392, argues that *Romeo and Juliet* draws on the literary tradition of love as its own religion with its own paradise after death but that Shakespeare reconciles the religion of love with a Christian cosmology whereas the two jar awkwardly in the source texts. Shakespeare, Siegel claims, makes the protagonists' love a part of the divine love that orders the Christian universe (383). Ramie Targoff, "Mortal Love: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the Practice of Joint Burial," *Representations* (Fall 2012): 17-38, in contrast to Siegel, argues that Shakespeare only evokes the idea of the religion of love in order to deny its premise of a lovers' paradise after death. Targoff argues that the play also denies a Christian afterlife to the lovers' souls and that much of the play's poignancy derives from the true mortality of the lovers. For more on "love religion" in the context of medieval courtly love, see also C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford, 1936, 1963), esp. 18, 41-42.

character as developed within the sonnet is a specifically *Catholic* saint, who must necessarily be dead.

Some have seen Juliet's secular sainthood in *Romeo and Juliet* as a response to the emotional vacuum left when veneration of saints was forbidden. Carol Banks outlines the Catholic prominence and Reformation wane of the icons of female saints in England. "Before the Reformation," she explains, "female figures featured prominently in the visual imagery of the church: the Virgin Mary, female saints, and female members of the aristocratic families who commissioned these religious works all served to effectively convey Christian values to the believing spectator by their visible body language." But these visible, holy female bodies went out with the other icons in the Reformation: "when reforming iconoclasts stripped the churches and shrines of their visual imagery, these figures of female authority were erased from outward sight, Marian devotion was ruthlessly suppressed, and religious imagery was mocked and derided as part of the superstitious trappings of the church of Rome."[75] However, some iconography was within Shakespeare's memory. In fact, as A.G. Harmon notes, "in Shakespeare's home parish" of Stratford, even a fresco of the controversial Thomas A'Becket as a saint was still "intact some 30 years after the onset of English iconoclasm" in 1565.[76] Still, devotion to saints was on the wane, and some have seen Shakespeare's use of saints and other Catholic imagery on the stage as a response to their decline elsewhere. Stephen Greenblatt claims that in the wake of the Reformation, Shakespeare's works show "a

[75] Carol Banks, "'You are Pictures out of doore, Saints in your Iniuries': picturing the female body in Shakespeare's plays," *Women's Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period* 8, no. 2 (2001): 295. For much more on the Reformation's effect on forms of devotion, see also Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), especially 155-206 on saints.
[76] A.G. Harmon, "Shakespeare's Carved Saints," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 45, no. 2 (2005): 320.

drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular" with "evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning."[77] Laroque argues that Shakespeare makes his lovers into quasi-saints in order to take the place of the Catholic devotion to saints which Protestantism was edging out. According to Laroque, "It would seem then that Shakespeare's new cult of saints on the stage substitutes the 'fiery torch' of *amour passion*" for Catholic ritual "and replaces the now obsolete *Golden Legend* [the collection of saints' life stories] by the new genre of the love tragedy."[78]

I would qualify this argument that Shakespeare's lover-saints are a response to the loss of Catholic devotion: Making secular lovers into saints is not a new invention with Shakespeare, and one does not have to be replacing Catholicism (either nostalgically or in Protestant zeal) in order to do it. Courtly love in the medieval tradition frequently invokes the language of religious devotion to further earthly (and usually illicit) love affairs, and courtly love flourished when Catholicism was still the dominant form of Christianity in the west.[79] Chretien de Troyes writes a Launcelot who burns with martyr-saint passion for the idolized Guenevere, and this is in the twelfth century. Malory, in the fifteenth century, has his version of Guenevere tell Lancelot that if he dies on account of their love affair, she herself will "take [her] dethe as mekely as ever ded marter take hys dethe for Jesu Chrystes sake" (875); she appropriates the language and emotional resonance of saintly martyrdom and applies it to her own potential death by burning for adultery—

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[77] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 126-7.
[78] Laroque, 25.
[79] See Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 1-44 on pre-Reformation courtly love and its relationship with (Catholic) Christianity.

again, in a Catholic context.[80] Petrarch and most of the pre-Reformation Italian love poets after him write beloved women as saints and love itself as a religion. Thus it is not reasonable to read the overlap in religious expression and secular love as solely a response to the loss of Catholic devotional practice. However, it is fair to say that Shakespeare places his lovers into the patterns established for saints, and that in his context, the religious aspects of their devotion evoke complicated cultural memories of Catholic practice.

Whether the context is Catholic or Protestant, Petrarchan devotion always verges on idolatry, but the Reformation's fervor for eradicating idol worship lends a particular edge to the meeting sonnet. Whenever a lover applies terms of adoration normally meant for God or the saints instead to praise—and, for the more cynical lover, to seduce—an earthly woman, his love speeches will be sacrilegious.[81] Shakespeare anticipates this charge in Sonnet 105, which begins "Let not my love be called idolatry / Nor my beloved as an idol show" and argues that the singlemindedness of the speaker's devotion absolves him from the charge of idolatry.[82] Because idolatry is equated with unfaithfulness to God, the speaker counters by declaring his faithfulness to his beloved as a single poetic theme—but this does not answer the objection that his faith is misapplied, given to a woman and not to God. Julia Staykova, elucidating the significance of the meeting scene

[80] This moment is a slant foreshadowing of Guenevere's saintly death at the end of the *Morte*. Guinevere the nun would presumably look back with sorrow on a time when she compared a death for sinful love with the meekness of saintly Christian martyrdom. Yet her death in the end is both of these things.

[81] See Kuchar, who argues that the beloved lady addressed by the lover in Petrarchan poetry takes the position of God as addressed by a penitent sinner: "Petrarchism thus shares a basic structural affinity with the Pauline penitential theology underwriting Donne's *Holy Sonnets*: it positions the Lady in a transcendent place that can be appealed to but never actually inhabited, addressed but never fully embodied in material terms" (550). See also Chapter 1, 41-43 on the structural parallels between chivalric knights' devotion to ladies and Grail quest knights' devotion to God.

[82] Shakespeare, "Sonnet 105," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2009), 1703.

in a Protestant context, reads idolatrous implications in the sonnet, where Romeo as a Petrarchan lover applies the language of religious devotion to Juliet. "In its ambivalent portrayal of the discredited Catholic rite," Staykova says, "the scene brings the vision of the Reformation into dialogue with the Petrarchan poetic tradition." The encounter highlights a "double suggestiveness of Petrarchan language, with its gravitational pull between the vocabulary of religious worship and erotic love." In "the context of the Reformation," with all its fear of Catholic devotion as idol worship, "The idolatrous undertones implicit in this merger between religious and erotic affect become explicit."[83] In the meeting sonnet, then, Shakespeare brings the heightened religious anxieties of his own moment to bear on the tradition of Petrarchan poetry and its implications of idolatry.

Neoplatonic love (in theory) solves this problem of the lover as idolater by eliminating carnal desire from love and by making the beloved woman, like the saints and their relics and icons in Catholic devotion, into a conduit for heavenly realities rather than a rival to them. This way the lover can speak of his lady in terms of religious devotion without idolatry because loving her *is* religious devotion. For a lover who adheres to Castiglione's pattern, language of worship to God or veneration to saints is not co-opted metaphorically and integrated into his love of a lady. Rather, love of a lady is co-opted and integrated into the lover's real quest for divine enlightenment. Castiglione is writing in an Italian Catholic context, and the more zealously protestant members of Shakespeare's audience would likely reject Castiglione's idea of the beloved lady as a conduit to divine enlightenment for the same reasons that they would condemn

[83] Julia D. Staykova, "Adultery, Idolatry and the Theatricality of False Piety in Shakespearean Scenes of Devotion," *Shakespeare* 7, no. 2 (2011): 173.

veneration of saints as idolatrous.[84] Furthermore, Romeo (as discussed above) is not up to Castiglione's standards for the spiritual lover, and so even though he does see Juliet as his conduit to spiritual realities, he is still in danger of venerating her for the wrong reasons. The way that Neoplatonic theory clears the Petrarchan lover of idolatry is ingenious, but it does not fully clear Romeo, and in the eyes of more iconoclastic audience members, it may not clear anyone.

The meeting sonnet, then, remains on the verge of a Petrarchan kind of idolatry, an idolatry in which both God and Juliet are in danger of being displaced by Romeo's poetry. Staykova argues that Petrarchan poetry "is doubly idolatrous, first in transposing the vocabulary of religious worship into an erotic context, and then in attaching the lover's mental energies to an image that supplants the lady's physical body."[85] Petrarchan poetry is idolatrous against God by transferring the language of religious worship to the lover's devotion to his lady instead of God, and it is also idolatrous against the lady herself by replacing her with images, fixating on the poetic language above the present person, in much the same way that Reformation iconoclasts would say that Catholic statuary icons usurp devotion to God as God really is.

Audiences' anxieties about idolatry reflect Juliet's own anxiety about how her living presence could be displaced by inadequate images in Romeo's poetry. Though critics have emphasized the mutuality of the meeting sonnet in which Juliet speaks and makes her presence felt, I argue that even when she is physically present as Romeo

[84] Castiglione, like Shakespeare, is reticent about religious details. Pietro Bembo normally talks about the lover's path to enlightenment in vaguely spiritual terms, but see 256 and 257 for brief mentions of God in the lover's ascent; 257 also contains Bembo's most extensive references to the Hebrew Bible. See also 161, 259-260 for mentions of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, and other female saints; these mentions come up in order to refute misogynistic comments.

[85] Staykova, 73.

composes a Petrarchan poem directly to her, she is aware of the danger of being replaced by Romeo's poetic image of her. Her bodily presence on the stage is not enough to keep Romeo from substituting his own Petrarchan poetic images for the real Juliet, and she must insert herself into the poem verbally as well as physically in order to avoid being displaced by Romeo's image of her as a silent shrine.

Amid all of the complexly layered play on religious systems in the meeting sonnet, we still have two characters using imaginative language to work out their places in the world and the nature of their relationship with one another. Shell thinks that Juliet's imagination may be the most remarkable feature of the meeting sonnet: "Perhaps most fascinatingly of all, the lines show Juliet imagining herself into the position of a saint, something which most Renaissance women who are the object of such addresses got no opportunity to do."[86] Myriads of poems in Petrarch's lineage feature male speakers who venerate their beloved women as saints and angels—with Juliet, we get to see how a beloved woman imagines herself in a Petrarchan framework. While I agree that the mutuality of the sonnet and Juliet's particular subjectivity are remarkable, I also contend that Juliet is ambivalent about her own poetic sainthood. Juliet challenges the structures of Petrarchism and Neoplatonism because she is not sure she *wants* to be an elevated but distant Petrarchan lady or a Neoplatonic stepping stone on Romeo's spiritual quest for enlightenment. She works to be a living presence to Romeo, not bound by the conceits of his imagination—but because she is working within the framework of a Petrarchan love poem, she, too, supplies flawed and idolatrous images of herself for him to adore.

[86] Shell, 62.

She imaginatively transforms herself into a saint so that she can continue to inhabit the world of the poem and thus continue to interact with Romeo, but she would prefer to transform herself yet again into a fellow pilgrim.[87] When Romeo insists on her sainthood, she allows it in order to work toward more meaningful interaction with him. But we don't know how Juliet would have imagined herself if she had begun the poem, and with the terms set by Romeo, sainthood is a difficult compromise for Juliet. Juliet and Romeo will continue to work through the implications of their spiritual love poetry and Juliet's sainthood in their next encounter.

### 3.6 Petrarchism and Linguistic Disruption in the Balcony Scene

Many have noted the contrast between Juliet's practicality and Romeo's poeticism in the balcony scene; in part, this dynamic is an extension of Romeo's attempts to spiritualize their encounters and Juliet's resistance, both of which we have already seen in the meeting sonnet. While Romeo opens with celestial metaphors, Juliet considers pragmatically how the two of them can be together, and as soon as she is aware of Romeo's presence, she leads with terse questions and real concerns about Romeo's safety. Levenson observes the way Juliet resists Petrarchan abstraction in the balcony encounter: "As [the lovers] find voices to articulate their feelings, Juliet in particular discards pointless words and conventions. She ignores Romeo's conceits early in their garden scene, intent on learning his identity and access."[88] Tina Packer notes that while

[87] See Petrarch trans. Cook, 23 for the Ovidian metamorphoses of the lover. When she tries to transform her own poetic identity, Juliet is trying (with mixed success) to take some of the power that typically belongs to the male lover-poet.
[88] Levenson, 57

Romeo tries out soaring new variations on a poetic theme, "Juliet is far more practical."[89] Honegger says that here at the start of the orchard scene, "Romeo is still busy searching for new oxymorons and metaphors," and Juliet is the one "who gets down to the reality of love and the problems that such a liaison creates."[90] Juliet again pushes back against Romeo's poetic language as she tries to work toward a relationship with him.

When Romeo sees Juliet in the garden, he again experiences her beauty first as radiance (as per Castiglione), and he tries out elaborate heavenly metaphors for her (as per Petrarch) before she has seen him. "But soft, what light from yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun" (2.1.45-46), Romeo asks and answers when he sees Juliet at the balcony. Similarly, Petrarch's speaker often represents Laura as the sun in poems that highlight her spiritual guidance, generative power, and overwhelming beauty.[91] Romeo then moves rapidly through other celestial metaphors: Juliet could be a vestal virgin to the moon (47-51), or the stars have run an errand and asked "her eyes / To twinkle in their spheres till they return" (58-60).[92] Packer claims that when Romeo envisions Juliet's eyes shining in place of stars, "It's a journey that allows Romeo's spirit to fly upward."[93] Though Packer may be correct to say that by picturing Juliet's eyes in

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[89] Tina Packer, *Women of Will: Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Knopf, 2015), 97.
[90] Honegger, 76.
[91] See Petrarch, trans. Cook 9, 19, 22, 23.115 ff, 73, 90, 176, 194, 248, 254, 275, 306. See also 43, where Apollo the sun god is pictured looking forth from a balcony.
[92] In Petrarch, trans. Cooke, 31, Petrarch's speaker imagines that *at her death*, Laura would become a heavenly light that would make the sun and the other stars pale. I have been unable to find evidence that this poem was translated into English, but the possibility of a specific reference is nonetheless intriguing. Whether or not Shakespeare knew a version of this poem, when Romeo imagines Juliet's ascent to the heavens, he foreshadows her death.
[93] Packer, 97. Packer does not elaborate on the implications of this excellent point for Romeo's spiritual journey in love. If Romeo's spirit ascends through the heavens, this scene stands alongside such moments in literature as the ascent of Dante in *Paradiso* (see the end of Canto 22 for Dante's glance back at the earth) and the ascent of Troilus' spirit at the end of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

the heavens, Romeo propels himself into the celestial scene because he sees it in his imagination, I note that Romeo does not directly place himself in the heavenly picture. As in the meeting sonnet (and as Snow rightly observes), Romeo's imaginative scenes exist in a disconnected visual space, and he has trouble integrating himself into them. When Romeo does mention himself, it is in the more terrestrial wish to be "a glove upon that hand" so that he could "touch that cheek" (2.1.67-68). As before, though Romeo experiences Juliet visually as radiance and sees her as a heavenly being, looking at Juliet is not enough for him, and he wants to get closer to her by touching her. Poetically and relationally, there is a gap between these two imaginative projections—in a visual fantasy, he thinks of Juliet as a celestial object, and in a tactile fantasy, he thinks of himself as a glove. As in the meeting sonnet, the way that Romeo exalts Juliet and minimizes himself in his poetry creates a separation between them.

When he sees Juliet in the garden, Romeo views her as his own connection to a heavenly reality just as he did before at the banquet. When he first speaks in Juliet's direction (though not yet intending for her to hear), he calls her an angel.

> She speaks.
> O speak again, bright angel, for thou art
> As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,
> As is a winged messenger of heaven
> Unto the white upturned wond'ring eyes
> Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
> When he bestrides the lazy puffing clouds
> And sails upon the bosom of the air. (2.1.68-75)

Romeo called her a saint before, and now he calls her an angel—the "messenger of heaven" which, like the saints, is an intermediary between mortals and God. The saint brings living people's petitions before God, and the angel, scripturally, brings messages

from God to living people. Thus Juliet is doubly Romeo's heavenly intercessor, and now she is appropriately standing above Romeo, between him and the sky, on the balcony. As in the meeting sonnet, Romeo is still spiritualizing Juliet and making her his link between earth and heaven; but the irony is that when he addressed Juliet as a saint, a being who *listens* to humans' prayers, she talked back to him, but now when he addresses her as an angel, a being who *speaks* God's messages to humans, she does not get to speak a word in reply because Romeo has not revealed his presence.

As in the meeting sonnet, Romeo's spiritualizing poetry about Juliet can be an obstacle to interaction with Juliet—firstly, the angel speech is an obstacle to interaction because in it Romeo chooses to speak spiritual poetry *about* Juliet rather than speak anything *to* Juliet. When he first hears Juliet say, "Ay me," (2.1.68), he does not decide to reveal his presence and speak back to her. Though she is present, Romeo apostrophizes her as if she were absent when he says, "O speak again, bright angel," (2.1.69) but does not say it loudly enough for her to hear—and indeed does not even take a full stop or a line break's pause to listen in case she *does* speak again before he launches into his detailed simile about the angel.[94] Romeo commits a classic Petrarchan error here by prioritizing his own poetry over its object: He chatters on to himself in metaphors rather than seizing the chance to speak with his beloved, to be heard by her and hear what she has to say in turn. By talking about Juliet rather than to her even though she is present, Romeo has failed to further his relationship with Juliet.

[94] A pause could certainly be present in a staged version depending on directorial choices, but it does not seem to be implied by syntax or prosody because "bright angel" immediately follows "speak again" as the subject of the verb and is in the middle of a line.

Additionally, Romeo's spiritual poetry about Juliet here is an interactive failure because, as in the meeting sonnet, Romeo's own identity is ambiguous in the dramatic imagery he constructs. His poetic scene here (like the initial jumble of hands and lips and shrines in the meeting sonnet) does not set the stage effectively for an interaction between two people (as, in contrast, the pilgrim's prayer to the saint near the end of the meeting sonnet does). After the quick succession of celestial images in the preceding lines, Romeo here collects Juliet into a single image, the angel flying through the heavens, but he fails to collect himself, and so again fails to build a poetic scene in which the two lovers can interact. The angel is singular, but the mortals who look upward in awe are plural, so this is a description of Juliet as generally wondrous, and it sidesteps more direct metaphor for their encounter. Romeo says, "You are awe-inspiring like an angel," but he misses the chance to say, "*I* look at you with awe, as a mortal looks at an angel." Snow, as noted above, argues that Romeo's visual images "tend to make him an onlooker rather than a participant." [95] In this case Romeo is even further removed from the action than Snow says he tends to be, because Romeo is not even an onlooker to the angel, his figure for Juliet. Rather, Romeo is an onlooker to the onlookers. He is not placing himself in the position of a particular observer who has particular feelings about the angel—he is imagining that a group of onlookers *would* have feelings about the angel, and he is observing those observers. Here and in the meeting sonnet, Romeo's failure to imagine himself in his love poetry is particularly dire because it thwarts the kind of immediate, one-on-one interaction that Juliet craves.

[95] Snow, 170. Snow claims that even when Romeo participates in the world he imagines, his "metaphors make him an object that remains separate from and unchanged by disembodied emotional forces acting on him from without" (171).

Meanwhile, Juliet, though she is unaware that interaction with Romeo is immediately possible, is diligently working out the practicalities of how she and Romeo can have a relationship despite the family feud.

> O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
> Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
> Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
> And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
> (2.1.76-79)

While Romeo is thinking in a jumbled way about suns, Diana's vestal virgins, stars, and angels being sighted by crowds of mortals, Juliet is thinking lucidly and logically about what it will take for her and Romeo to get together. Romeo is not yet ready to talk to Juliet even though she is standing right above him; Juliet is already making long term plans. Since their families are enemies, she reasons, either Romeo will have to disown his kin or she will have to disown hers. She is willing to leave her family for Romeo, but she will require commitment from him first in order to do so.

Even when he hears this unambiguous evidence that Juliet loves him, Romeo hesitates to interact with her. "Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?" he asks (2.1.80). He does not, as she requires, immediately either renounce his own family name or declare his love outright so that she can renounce the Capulet clan, but rather he continues to listen in on meditations she believes are solitary. In both his poetry and the way he chooses to handle the encounter socially, Romeo fails to promote open communication.

Meanwhile, as Juliet continues to meditate on the significance of family names, she calls into question the whole concept of communication through language. When she calls out the arbitrariness of names, Juliet questions the power of the poetic word as well.

In the meeting sonnet, Juliet negotiates her role in a new relationship through the words of the mutual poem, but now words—specifically family names—are in the way of that relationship, and Juliet must reconsider the weight assigned to them. As Honegger puts it, she is effectively doing "Saussurean analysis…of the relationship between signifier and signified."[96] Juliet thinks here about the arbitrariness of attaching words and names to real things:

> 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
> What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
> Nor arm nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man. O be some other name!
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other word would smell as sweet;
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title. Romeo doff thy name,
> And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
> Take all myself.
> (2.1.84-92)

Juliet's dismissal of names may seem naïvely optimistic—after all, family names mean a great deal to other people, and these other people will make her relationship with Romeo extremely difficult in practice—but its implications about language are catastrophic.[97] David Lucking argues that Juliet calls into question not just names but "the entire network of codes through which experience is mediated and the individual's vision of

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[96] Honegger, 76.

[97] Cf. Falstaff's deconstruction of "honor" as a mere empty word. Falstaff's analysis can be read as self-serving equivocation to fit Falstaff's immediate wish to escape the dangers of battle, but its implications about language and society are serious, either nihilistic or existential (*1 Henry IV* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2009), 5.1.127-139). See also Iago's manipulative dismissal of "reputation" in *Othello* (also in the *Norton Shakespeare*), 2.3.246-254. In addition, see Queen Gynecia's meditation on whether "virtue" is a real thing or only a word (Sidney, *Arcadia*, 214).

reality constituted."[98] As the coming scene will show, Juliet and Romeo need language to mean something. Castiglione says that "words…are the interpreters of the soul,"[99] and when Romeo wants to kiss Juliet from the start of the meeting sonnet, Juliet wants to continue using words to develop their relationship rather than rushing toward the physical act of kissing. But if words are arbitrary and can be applied to any one thing as well as another, then declarations of love may be equally arbitrary. Juliet, who has so adeptly negotiated her poetic and social roles through language so far, now questions the validity of language. Juliet began working within the words of the meeting sonnet to negotiate her place and change the shape of Petrarchan love poetry; her unlinking of language from experience here undermines the whole concept of love poetry.

But just as Juliet is working up to a linguistic crisis that could revoke the power of words, Romeo seizes on Juliet's words and asks her to define him with a new christening; he seeks a new spiritual identity through contact with Juliet. "I take thee at thy word," Romeo interrupts, "Call me but love and I'll be new baptized: / Henceforth I never will be Romeo" (2.1.92-4). This is the first time that Romeo speaks directly to Juliet in the balcony exchange, and here he remembers the first command he heard from her when he was eavesdropping: "Deny thy father and refuse thy name" (2.1.76). Romeo, an obedient lover, offers to give up his name and seek a new identity as Juliet's love. The baptism Romeo requests is both the giving of a new name, in answer to Juliet's wish that he should not be a Montague, and the beginning of a new spiritual identity, in accordance

[98] David Lucking, "That Which We Call a Name: The Balcony Scene in *Romeo and Juliet*," *English* (1995) 44 (178): 3. Lucking goes on to argue that the lovers' downfall is the result of their inability to either live fully in the social world constructed by language or live fully in a private emotional world of their own: "It is the contradiction between the two worlds in which they simultaneously participate, and their incapacity to commit themselves unreservedly to either one or the other, that destroys the lovers in the end" (12).
[99] Castiglione, 253.

with his own experience of loving Juliet as a transcendent and transformative experience. He believes that Juliet can change him into a new person by baptizing him as her love.

Juliet does not respond to Romeo's lofty expectation of a new spiritual birth in love because Juliet has been interrupted in what she thought was solitary meditation, and she is startled and unprepared to confront the eavesdropper. "What man art thou that, thus bescreened in night, / So stumblest on my counsel?" (2.1.95-96). Her response, again, is practical: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" Though Romeo does obey Juliet's wish that he give up his name, and though his speech is an idealistic plea for new birth through love, his action in speaking this way and at this time is boorish. Honegger, in a brilliant interactional analysis of the scene, argues that Romeo "has committed a grave interactional sin" by listening to Juliet's private thoughts and further by holding her to words that weren't meant to be heard. Romeo's boldness, says Honegger, "severely impinges upon Juliet's interactional freedom" and keeps her from acting prudently and waiting for assurance of his sincerity before being explicit about her own love.[100] Romeo eavesdrops on Juliet's private thoughts, startles her, and perhaps worst of all, seizes on words that were spoken in solitary thought as if they were spoken to him.

When Romeo tries to answer Juliet's question ("What man art thou?"), he runs up against the abstract problem of names again, but Juliet handles the philosophical problem by turning toward the physical, human concerns of their relationship. When asked who he is, Romeo answers,

> By a name
> I know not how to tell thee who I am.
> My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,

[100] Honegger, 77.

> Because it is an enemy to thee.
> Had I it written, I would tear the word.
> (2.1.97-100)

Romeo has picked up on Juliet's problem with names, but he takes it in an opposite direction. He reifies the name and calls it her enemy, whereas she has pointed out that names are insubstantial. He gives substance to the name, whereas she wants to separate essences from names, the scent of the rose from the name of the rose. In order to make sure that Juliet knows who he is without mentioning his own "hateful" name, Romeo addresses Juliet by her poetic title as "dear saint," inviting a sequel to the meeting sonnet. He knows from their last encounter that Juliet can play poetic games, and so he gives her two from which to work: She can continue the linguistic argument of her own meditation, or she can continue the saint and pilgrim role play from her first meeting with Romeo.

But in this moment, when she is startled by her lover's presence in the garden, Juliet does not care about either reshaping or demolishing the poetic word—she cares about Romeo's physical presence more than either the saint poem or the unravelling of names and meanings. Her attention to Romeo's presence partially extricates her from the crisis of language she was approaching on her own. At the party, Juliet was acting the part of the court lady, willing to work toward out her social intentions under the veil of a miniature poetic drama and to bend Romeo's metaphors rather than break them. In her own meditations, she questioned the foundations of language and poetry. But here, encountering Romeo in the garden, Juliet refuses his gambit, taking up neither debate about names nor the continuation of poetic saint role play. Instead, she concentrates on an intimately human, sensory aspect of her relationship with Romeo—she already knows his voice: "My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words / Of thy tongue's uttering, yet I

know the sound. / Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?" (2.1.101-03). In a way, she has abandoned her bold disruption of linguistic authority—she has said that Romeo Montague's name is arbitrary, yet she nevertheless uses it now to identify him in the dark. But in another way, she is subtly bridging the gap she has exposed between the words for things and the essences of things. There is Romeo, the person whom she loves, and then there are Romeo's words—both words *spoken by* Romeo (his love speeches) and words *for* Romeo (his personal and family names). Juliet's discourse about names reveals a chasm between Romeo and Romeo's words. Yet in the moment when she recognizes him, Juliet introduces a mediating third term: Romeo's voice. Romeo's voice carries words, yet it is also a sensory experience like the scent of the rose, so it makes the words less detached and arbitrary. Juliet does not want to believe that names are important enough to separate lovers whose families are enemies, and she must therefore also question the validity of other words, such as lovers' vows (2.1.133-136). Yet she also needs words in order to communicate with Romeo from the balcony. She can make the necessary compromise by choosing to trust Romeo's voice, which carries abstract words but which is also a personal and sensory connection to him. Thus, by recognizing Romeo's voice, Juliet is able to continue verbal and poetic negotiation in the balcony scene despite her deconstruction of linguistic authority.

Though the stakes and the tone of the negotiation are different in the garden than in the meeting sonnet, here Juliet continues to resist Romeo's poetic conceits and to consider foremost how she and Romeo can be in a mutual and meaningful relationship. Under the circumstances, Romeo's physical safety is what she thinks of first. She and Romeo cannot be in a mutual and meaningful relationship if Romeo is murdered by angry

Capulets. Romeo, however, is so overwhelmed with love that he doesn't even care about being murdered, and so the lovers are at cross purposes for a while. When she knows that it is Romeo, she asks,

> How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
> The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
> And the place death, considering who thou art,
> If any of my kinsmen find thee here.
> (2.1.105-8)[101]

Her fears are entirely reasonable. Tybalt almost stabbed Romeo at the banquet and would certainly do so here in the garden where Romeo is trespassing and old Capulet is not present to scold Tybalt against the indecorum of murdering people at a feast (1.4.167-195). Yet Romeo infuriatingly answers Juliet's fears for his life with more poetry:

> With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
> For stony limits cannot hold love out,
> And what love can do, that dares love attempt:
> Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.
> (2.1.109-12)

Romeo has been transformed by love. He no longer seeks darkness (1.1.133-36) or has "a soul of lead" (1.4.13), but now flies "with love's light wings"—light in the senses of both weightless and radiant. Petrarch says that the ennobled lover poet "tien dal soggeto un habito gentile, / che con l'ale amorose / levando il parte d'ogni pensier vile" ("Draws from his subject usage courteous / So, rising on the wings / Of Love, he sheds each

[101] The pragmatic way that Juliet says, "The orchard walls are high and hard to climb" raises the question of whether Juliet has ever tried to climb *out* of the garden.

thought contemptible").[102] Romeo cares more about his fledgling enlightenment through love than he does about the practical dangers of his position. Juliet, however, answers symbols with nearly monosyllabic facts: "If they do see thee, they will murder thee" (2.1.113). Romeo wants to talk poetry about how love transforms and elevates him, but Juliet is genuinely concerned that he might die.

The scene draws out this cross-purpose dialogue for humorous effect, but it also makes the point that Romeo's poetic notions about love are exceedingly dangerous in real life. When Juliet warns him of murder, he responds with the Petrarchan trope of being stabbed by a woman's eyes: "Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye / Than twenty of their swords. Look thou but sweet, / And I am proof against their enmity" (114-16). Like countless Petrarchan poets before him, Romeo speaks as if a harsh glance from his mistress is the only thing that could harm him, and her benevolent gaze would assure his complete wellbeing.[103] Juliet is not concerned with her own eyesight but that of her kinsmen: "I would not for the world they saw you here" (114-17). While Romeo continues his Petrarchan raptures, Juliet pushes back because she is concerned with keeping Romeo alive.

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[102] Petrarch, trans. Cook, 71.11-13. See 163, 194, 339, and 360 for more about love and wings. See also 23.161ff for the lover's metamorphoses based on Jove's in Ovid; the lover says he has not become a rain of gold, but he has (through the elevating transformation of love) become an eagle. Also see *Songes and Sonettes*, ed. Marquis 108.22-26, where the speaker laments the beloved's absence and wishes for wings:

> So great a weight, so heavy charge the bodies that we bere:
> That, when I think upon the distaunce, and the space:
> That doth so farre devide me from my dere desired face:
> I know not, how tattain the winges, that I require,
> To lift me up: that I might flie, to follow my desire.

[103] In Petrarch, trans. Cook, 2 and 3, the speaker's heart fails to defend him against the bowshot of love and he is caught unarmed and captured by his lady's glance. In Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* 12, reason withstands the assaults of love and sensuality but surrenders "as soon as they strake...with Stella's rays."

While Juliet continues to resist Romeo's spiritual Petrarchan love poetry, the balcony scene reveals that the lovers have not found a stable alternative form of communication: They never actually do exchange vows, and Juliet chooses to give her loyalty to Romeo without verbal assurance. Though Romeo attempts a flowery oath "by yonder blessed moon," Juliet cuts him off because the symbolism of the ever-changing moon is wrong for a vow of constant love (2.1.150-154). She tells him to swear by himself instead, but when she hears him begin another dripping vow, she cuts him off yet again before he can give poetic assurance of his faithful love (2.1.154-159). The "satisfaction" Romeo wants from this meeting with Juliet is "Th'exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine" (2.1.169-70), but this exchange never happens in the balcony scene. Though Romeo shows that he loves Juliet in his short speeches throughout the scene, he never makes the full vow of love that he wants to make. Even when Juliet proposes marriage, Romeo never directly answers in the affirmative—though his enthusiastic exclamations and his agreement as to a time to receive her message leave little doubt about his feelings (2.1.184-191, 199, 210-212, 214). Juliet does not trust Romeo's poetic words and may not trust prosaic ones either after questioning the connection between linguistic names and experienced realities. She does not forge an alternative, more trustworthy form of communication to replace Petrarchan poetry, yet here in the balcony scene, Juliet does not need Romeo's vows in order to trust Romeo himself.

When Juliet makes a free declaration of her love to Romeo without having first received his vow, she resists the separation implied by Petrarchan poetry. Earlier in the

scene, when Juliet asks him how he found his way to the garden, Romeo uses the ubiquitous Petrarchan image of travel by ship:

> I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far
> As that vast shore washed with the farthest sea,
> I should adventure for such merchandise.
> (2.1.125-27)[104]

In this image, Romeo boasts that he would cross the ocean in order to reach Juliet, and Juliet is meant to be flattered because this metaphor implies that she is a valuable treasure and that Romeo would be willing to endure much more severe travail and danger for her sake than the trouble of finding entrance to the Capulet garden. Yet, like the image of Juliet as a shrine in the meeting sonnet, it makes her inanimate. And like the image of the saint, this Petrarchan metaphor of far-off treasure makes Juliet distant from Romeo even as it praises her value. Juliet instead wants to be alive and to be close to Romeo. Later in the balcony scene, after Romeo has asked for the exchange of vows, Juliet counters his Petrarchan ship image in her free declaration of love:

> My bounty is a boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
> The more I have, for both are infinite.
> (2.1.176-8)[105]

Here Juliet is not a distant treasure for which Romeo must sail his little Petrarchan ship to the distant Americas: instead, she is the sea that already surrounds him. In this

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[104] Perhaps the best-known Petrarchan poem to come into English is Petrarch's Poem 189, translated in Tottel's *Songes and Sonnettes* by Thomas Wyatt as "My galley charged with forgetfulnesse" (55). In this poem, the speaker compares various aspects of his own psyche in love to elements of an endangered ship at sea. See also Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* 32 and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* 15 (in *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*, 3rd ed., ed. Hugh MacLean and Anne Lake Prescott (New York: Norton, 1993)), where the speakers compare their beloved women to treasures in India or the Americas.

[105] Honegger, in his excellent interactional analysis of the scene, reads Juliet's declaration of love here as a response to Romeo's question at 2.1.173, "Wouldst thou withdraw [your vow]?" Honegger thinks that Romeo partially atones for his interactional failures by giving Juliet the chance to withdraw the words he was not intended to hear and to speak again as she chooses, and that Juliet responds with generosity when granted this freedom (80-81).

majestically erotic image, Juliet works against Petrarchan separation and declares her love as a free gift independent of Romeo's vows. Though she knows she cannot trust his Petrarchan protestations of faithfulness, Juliet chooses to give Romeo her love; though she knows that language is an unstable representation of experience, she continues to use poetry to negotiate her own meaning and her relationship with Romeo.

While she is living, Juliet disrupts the genre of Petrarchan poetry and Romeo's attempts to assign spiritual meaning to her. Though she refuses the Neoplatonic role of spiritual conduit, she acts as Romeo's guide by redirecting his poetry toward more open and mutual interactions with her in both the meeting sonnet and the balcony scene. Juliet wants to be not a lifeless treasure on a distant shore, but the bountiful and dynamic sea beneath Romeo's wandering bark. She works to be a pilgrim rather than a saint so that she and Romeo can continue their journey together alive. Even as Juliet disrupts the medium of love poetry, she uses it to guide Romeo toward a more mutual experience of love.

# CHAPTER 4. JULIET *IN MORTE*

## 4.1 Juliet's Sainthood in the Tomb

In the scene of Juliet's death and the scenes following, Juliet is no longer able to negotiate her role with Romeo. Without her guidance, the deadly implications of Romeo's Petrarchan and Neoplatonic love run their course. When Juliet no longer has a say in how she is represented, the death that the meeting sonnet foreshadows becomes real. In the meeting sonnet, Juliet resists the implications of her own death, but in the tomb scene and in Montague and Capulet's pledge to build memorial statues at the end of the play, she is no longer able to contest her own meaning. The meeting sonnet foreshadows both Juliet's death and her transformation into a statue because in the meeting sonnet, Juliet was either a saint's dead corpse or a saint's icon.[1] The relic reading plays out in the tomb, where Romeo treats Juliet's body as a saint's corpse and thereby fails to recognize that Juliet is alive. The icon reading plays out after her death, when Montague and Capulet promise to build gold monuments for the dead lovers. In the statue scene, Juliet's meaning is interpreted by others who see her as a saintly martyr to love and build a statuary shrine for her, giving her exactly the representation she wishes to avoid in the meeting sonnet.

The scene at the tomb echoes the lovers' first meeting and brings all of its darkest implications of Juliet's sainthood and death to the forefront. Romeo's spiritualized love leads to the lovers' deaths in the tomb scene, where Romeo is not only fulfilling the

[1] See Chapter 3, 121-124.

inadvertent prophecies of his former poetry, but he is also blinded in that present moment by his poetic ideals about Juliet. The lovers die in part because of Romeo's Petrarchan habits and elevated perceptions of Juliet as a saint and a spiritual conduit to enlightenment; Romeo's spiritualized love poetry is nonlethal only for as long as Juliet has a voice to resist it, and in the tomb she is not conscious to challenge Romeo's perceptions until it is too late.

Correspondences between the meeting scene discussed in the previous chapter and the lovers' death scene emphasize that Romeo's Petrarchan love poetry has been dangerous all along. The grim events in the tomb are not new—rather, they reveal the underlying morbidity present in the lovers' first meeting at the banquet, bringing full realization to the deadly implications of Juliet's sainthood. The deadness of the saint's body is silently implied in the meeting sonnet and gives the lovers' kiss eerie undertones. In the meeting sonnet, Romeo first calls Juliet a "holy shrine," and Juliet negotiates for a speaking role by progressively casting herself as a saint and then a fellow pilgrim with Romeo; however, Romeo insists on the more familiar Petrarchan casting and continues to address her as a saint (1.4.206-219). But if Juliet is a saint, then Juliet must be dead. And if Romeo has contact with Juliet's body (she says, "Saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch" (1.4.212), and at the end of the sonnet Romeo receives the kiss he has pressed for all along), then the poem implies that Romeo is kissing a corpse. In the meeting sonnet, Juliet and Romeo are celebrating their newfound love, and this morbid implication is allowed to stay in the background. By the end of the play, however, both lovers have in fact found themselves wanting to kiss dead bodies. The tomb scene unmasks the meeting sonnet's implications.

Characters at the tomb physically reenact parts of the lovers' first meeting, bringing the hidden dangers of the earlier scene into view. At the tomb, just as at Juliet and Romeo's first meeting, Romeo is trespassing on Capulet territory. Paris, on seeing him approach the Capulet tomb, exclaims, "This is that banished haughty Montague" and "Stop thy unhallowed toil, vile Montague!" (5.3.49, 54). At the Capulets' dance, Tybalt recognizes Romeo and speaks similarly: "Uncle, this is a Montague, our foe; / A villain that is hither come in spite / To scorn at our solemnity this night" (1.4.174-6). Tybalt and Paris both perceive Romeo as arrogant and scornful because Romeo ventures behind enemy lines at the banquet and the tomb. If Capulet had not intercepted Tybalt, there would have been bloodshed at the banquet, and Juliet and Romeo's love affair would have been over before it started. This reenactment of Romeo trespassing on forbidden Capulet grounds highlights the precarious nature of Juliet and Romeo's love affair from beginning to end and reinforces the structural alignment between the banquet scene and the tomb scene.

In a visual repetition more striking on stage than in print, Romeo carries a torch to the tomb just as he does to the Capulets' dance, and in both scenes, he perceives Juliet as a brighter light herself even though he is carrying a light source. By persistently seeing Juliet as a source of visual light and spiritual enlightenment, Romeo follows both Castiglione's pattern of Neoplatonic love and the poetic legacy of Petrarch.[2] When he first sees Juliet, in an actual feasting presence full of light at the Capulets' dance, he cries out, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" (1.4.157). On finding Juliet in the tomb, Romeo declares, "here lies Juliet and her beauty makes / This vault a feasting

[2] See Chapter 3, 103-107 and notes 31 and 91.

presence full of light" (5.3.85-86). On both occasions, Romeo is carrying a torch himself but is astonished by Juliet's radiance.[3] So whether or not there are other lights, and whether or not Juliet is even conscious, Romeo experiences Juliet's beauty as light, just as Castiglione says that a spiritual lover should experience a woman's spiritually enlightening beauty. Romeo the spiritual lover perceives Juliet as visual light from first to last.

But even more importantly, Romeo still perceives Juliet as a spiritually radiant saint just as he did in the beginning, and his perception of Juliet as a saint is part of what leads to her death and Romeo's own. In the meeting sonnet, Romeo persistently addresses Juliet as a saint even though she would prefer to be another living pilgrim. In the tomb, I argue that it is because Romeo sees Juliet as a saint that he does not realize she is still with him among the living when he observes that her body is not decaying. In the sonnet, Romeo ignores Juliet's preference to be represented as a living person in their mutual poem because he sees her as a saint: In the tomb, Romeo ignores her actual status as a living person because he sees her as a saint, and as a result, both of them end up actually dead.

Because saints' bodies were supposed to be incorruptible and not decay like normal bodies, Romeo may believe that Juliet's body is still beautiful in death because she is a saint. The beauty of Juliet's supposed corpse means that Romeo's wish to kiss it

[3] On the somewhat confusing torch situation at the tomb: When Paris enters, his servant carries a torch (5.3.1.), but then Paris orders the servant to extinguish it for fear of being seen (5.3.2), which is odd because Paris' business in the graveyard mourning his own betrothed seems perfectly lawful. Romeo also enters with his servant carrying a torch (5.3.21), and shortly Romeo takes the torch himself (25). Despite his status as a fugitive and a trespasser, Romeo does not raise concerns about the stealth of carrying a burning torch. He is also carrying a "mattock" and a "wrenching-iron" (5.3.22) to get into the closed tomb, and it is unclear what happens to all of these objects when he fights Paris at 5.3.70, but Romeo probably needs to retain or recover the torch at least in order to examine Paris' face (5.3.74).

does not feel like an urge to kiss old saints' bones; however, for Romeo, the good condition of Juliet's (supposed) corpse reinforces her connection with a saint's body. Shakespeare and his Catholic character Romeo both know that beauty and good fragrance after death are often a sign of sainthood. Many of the saints in the popular *Legenda Aurea* are granted the miracle of incorrupt corpses.[4] In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, as discussed in Chapter 2, the corpse of Perceval's sister remains miraculously incorrupt, and this preservation of her body is one indication that she is a saint (770).[5] At the end of the *Morte*, Sir Lancelot, after repenting of his sins and living as a holy man, dies a saintly death: "So whan Syr Bors and his felowes came to [Lancelot's] bedde, they founde hym starke dede; and he laye as he had smyled, and the swettest savour aboute hym that ever they felte" (938).[6] The corpses of Perceval's sister and Lancelot give physical evidence of these characters' saintliness because even though they are dead, they do not look or smell like decaying bodies.

Because Romeo perceives Juliet as a saint, her beauty in death is only to be expected. Romeo observes Juliet's condition, but because he believes that she is not a normal human being, he is unable to draw accurate conclusions from what he sees. We, the audience, know that Juliet's body is still beautiful because she is not really dead, but only under the influence of Friar Laurence's sleeping potion. Romeo, however, believes that he is looking at a remarkably—even miraculously—beautiful dead body. When he

[4] de Voragine, trans. Ryan, 260, 327, 652, and 698. See also A.G. Harmon and Francois Laroque for Shakespeare's familiarity with saints' lives.
[5] See Chapter 2, 77. See also Malory, 526, for a contrasting episode in which a pagan's corpse releases an intolerable stench immediately after death.
[6] See also Malory, 526, for a contrasting episode in which a pagan's corpse releases an intolerable stench immediately after death.

stops to examine Juliet's body, he observes the physical qualities of the body and is amazed that Juliet's remains are still beautiful and not corpse-like:

> Death, that has sucked the honey of thy breath,
> Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
> Thou art not conquered; beauty's ensign yet
> Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
> And death's pale flag is not advanced there.
> (5.3.92-96)

Here, Romeo is onto something but takes a wrong turn. He is perfectly right that death has not conquered Juliet. Yet he does not stop to think about what he has said and to look more closely at Juliet's supposed corpse. If Romeo perceives Juliet as a literal saint, the incorruption of sainthood explains her good condition, and Romeo accordingly does not consider the possibility that she is not dead at all.

In the tomb, Romeo's spiritualized love fails to take into account physical realities, the passage of time, and natural processes. Whittier argues that Romeo does not realize that Juliet is alive because he "no longer trusts bodily appearance, and he therefore does not test word against flesh, appearance against touch."[7] Snow sees Romeo's interpretation of the situation in the tomb as another aspect of the difficulty Romeo often has with creating continuity in the imaginative scenes of his poetry. Romeo's "personifications of the 'state' of death," Snow argues, "are a denial of time, process, and substance: death becomes a jealous lover (or would-be lover) who keeps Juliet in thrall, while worms attend on her as chambermaids." Romeo singles out death and reifies it as a hostile character rather than seeing it as a process in continuity with life or as a condition applied to Juliet's body. Snow contrasts Juliet's more holistic view of

[7] Whittier, 58.

the tomb with Romeo's poetic fragmentation: "Juliet, on the contrary, anticipating the future into which the Friar's potion will cause her to wake, thinks of the tomb as a place of real, historical time, where physical process continues in the absence of life."[8] Juliet describes there the tomb as

> an ancient receptacle,
> Where for this many hundred years the bones
> Of all my buried ancestors are packed,
> Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
> Lies fest'ring in his shroud.
> (4.3.38-42)

Juliet thinks about bodies decaying in the tomb and about natural and material processes; Romeo instead thinks in personifications and atemporal abstractions. Even though Romeo sees and presumably smells the decaying body of Tybalt in the tomb with the not-decaying body of Juliet for comparison (5.3.97), he fails to think about the fact that the bodies of the recently dead begin to decompose. Perhaps if the lovers' places had been reversed, Juliet would have suspected that a radiant body with crimson lips and cheeks, not bloated or discolored, was in fact not a corpse. Because Romeo is a self-absorbed Petrarchan lover who is oblivious to temporal and material realities and prefers poetic abstractions, he does not read the evidence in front of him, and he and Juliet both die as a result.

The image of Juliet as a saint in their first meeting, then, causes harm in two ways here in the tomb scene. First, there is the cruel logic that when Romeo addresses the living Juliet as a saint earlier, he does not mean for her to really die (a requisite for sainthood), but she does die, and her death is a consequence of his address. Though they

[8] Snow, 188.

both mean to speak metaphorically (about Juliet's sainthood), their speaking together at all results in their involvement, and the unintended consequences of their secret marriage in the end bring the scariest implication of their metaphor (Juliet's corpsehood) into literal reality. Second, the saint image from their first meeting harms Juliet and Romeo in a practical way because if Romeo had not been thinking of Juliet as a saint, he might have stopped to consider other reasons she might look good (including the possibility that she might still being alive) rather than assuming that her corpse must be special. Juliet's death displays the worst possible outcome of Petrarchan love poetry: The lady dies of being canonized.

Romeo, by believing that Juliet is a saint and that normal human biological rules do not apply to her, misses valuable pieces of information that could have saved both their lives. Juliet has been in the tomb for nearly two days, and her lips and cheeks are not pale. A more reasonable observer would realize that this is not what a two-day-old corpse looks like (it would be bloated and discolored) and would consider the possibility that Juliet is not dead. What is really happening here is that Juliet is almost ready to awake and shake off the potion's effects. This is not the way Juliet looks when her family pronounces her dead two days previous. In the first day of the potion's working, she definitely looks like a corpse, and as he laments her death, Capulet includes physical descriptions of how she looks like a corpse:

> Out, alas, she's cold!
> Her blood is settled, and her joints are stiff;
> Life and these lips have long been separated.
> Death lies on her like an untimely frost
> Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.
> (4.4.51-55)

The potion has reached its full effect when her family (convinced by physical signs that she is dead) brings her to the grave, and now, when Romeo finds her in the tomb, it is wearing off. Capulet observes that "life and these lips have long been separated," but Romeo instead sees that "beauty's ensign yet / Is crimson in [her] lips and in [her] cheeks, / And death's pale flag is not advanced there" (5.3.94-96). These observations of Juliet are materially different. Romeo cannot be expected to know how Juliet looked when she was first pronounced dead, and he cannot be expected to know about the existence of the potion. However, Juliet's body does not at all look like a two-day-old corpse when Romeo finds her in the tomb, and he himself notices the physiological signs of life in Juliet's body.

But instead of considering the possibility that Juliet, who looks alive, is indeed alive, Romeo remains blinded by his possessive feelings about Juliet in keeping with his own role as a Petrarchan poet-lover. He came intending to die on his beloved's body for grief, and in his distress, he carries out that intention even though his beloved's body is not dead. He is quick to read a rival suitor into the situation, personifying death in a jealous fantasy:

> Shall I believe
> That insubstantial death is amorous,
> And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
> Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
> (5.3.102-105)

For Romeo here, Juliet's appearance of living beauty is not an indicator of Juliet's own condition as potentially alive, but a sign that he needs to be on guard because she might have attracted another lover. This speech echoes Capulet's earlier words to Paris

describing death as Juliet's bridegroom and deflowerer, Paris' rival and Capulet's own son-in-law and heir:

> O son, the night before thy wedding-day
> Hath death lain with thy wife. There she lies,
> Flower as she was, deflow'red by him.
> Death is my son-in-law, death is my heir;
> My daughter he hath wedded. I will die
> And leave him all life living, all is death's.
> (4.4.61-66)

Capulet's speech, with its emphasis on the loss of Juliet's virginity (incidental to the loss of Juliet's whole life, but prioritized by Capulet) and his own consequent lack of a new male heir by Juliet's marriage to Paris, reinforces his characterization as a self-interested and controlling father who mourns Juliet's death for the wrong reasons. Romeo appears even more jealous and possessive when he speaks in the tomb of death as a rival because he chooses personifications so similar to Capulet's. More importantly, when Romeo sees death as Juliet's paramour and his own sexual rival, this is another Petrarchan move. Romeo turns away from the body of Juliet and its physical qualities that are directly in front of him and instead manifests fantasies of his own jealous psyche in the imaginary lustful monster death. Romeo's poetic habits come between him and Juliet yet again, but this time she is unconscious and cannot challenge the solipsism and fragmentation of his poetry or use her own words to guide Romeo to really look at her.

The way that Romeo's spiritual bent keeps him from seeing physical life in Juliet's body is even more tragic because of how the play sets up the expectation of a pseudo-miraculous resurrection for Juliet. Romeo is prepared to witness supernatural wonders in his relationship with Juliet, yet his expectation of miracles lets him take the perfect condition of her body in stride, which in turn leads to his suicide and precludes

the happy ending in which Juliet rises from apparent death to find Romeo beside her. Groves, reading Juliet as both a Christ figure and an echo of the comic heroine, examines the comic structures of the play that set up a hope for Juliet's resurrection. She argues that while Shakespeare downplays some of the paschal elements present in the source texts, he makes more of others:

> Many of the plot parallels between *Romeo and Juliet* and the Easter story (such as the friar who flees, like the women, from the tomb) were already present in Shakespeare's sources: Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* and Painter's *The Story of Romeo and Julietta*. In both of these the love-story is set within a liturgical framework. The birth and death of Romeo and Juliet's relationship occurs in synchrony with the birth and death of Christ: they meet at Christmas and are parted at Easter. Shakespeare has removed these markers of a paschal theme—his play is set in July—but retains their import. The sources draw attention to the significant timing of the tragedy, but they make little of its metaphorical possibilities. Shakespeare, by contrast, takes up their prompt and employs it with sophisticated artistry to imbue the fabric of his play with a subverted promise of redemption. Easter is no longer openly referred to, but the threat of death and the hope of resurrection become deeply entwined with the story.[9]

Groves argues that Shakespeare plays on these comic and Christological hopes of resurrection "until the bitter end," using the shadowed comic plotline to enhance the play's final "tragic pleasure."[10] Until Romeo dies, the audience can hope that everything will work out, and that Juliet—like Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, Helen in *All's Well that Ends Well*, or King Basilius in Sidney's *Arcadia*—will turn out to be alive and will get to live with her spouse in peace after everyone who needed it has had a scare and learned a lesson. This unfulfilled hope relies both on the comic trope of the faked death and on the Christological pattern of a real death miraculously overcome by divine life.

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[9] Groves, 61. See also 77-80 for a discussion of the Visitation of the Sepulcher liturgical tradition and its visual echoes *Romeo and Juliet*.
[10] Groves, 67.

This Christological pattern of death overcome by divine life is reflected in the Christian hope of resurrection for human beings, and Juliet's storyline also plays on the hope of human resurrection in several ways. Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker argue that "Romeo's tragic error [in thinking that Juliet is dead] serves to point out that the intermediate state in which he finds Juliet is a likeness not only of the transition from life to death, the '*entrance* into the *death of corruption*' [Donne's phrase] but also—Juliet does not show any marks of corruption—of the transition to life in death."[11] Juliet's liminal state, between the apparent death brought on by the potion and the return of her natural life, looks like it could be a transition in either direction—it could be mortal death, or it could be a resurrection underway. Juliet is poised between life and death, and the outcome unfortunately depends on Romeo's ability to interpret her.

Because he fails to see himself and Juliet as equals, Romeo is unable to imagine Juliet's resurrection. He dreams of his own resurrection by Juliet's miraculous power but cannot reverse the roles in the tomb. Just before the exiled Romeo hears the news from Verona of Juliet's death, he recalls a prophetic dream in which he sees Juliet raising him to life:

> I dreamt my lady came and found me dead—
> Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think!—
> And breathed such life with kisses in my lips
> That I revived and was an emperor.
> (5.1.330)

This dream, more flexibly interpreted, could prepare Romeo to make the correct decisions when he finds Juliet in the tomb. Romeo remarks on the strangeness that someone lying dead can still be thinking, and his experience in the dream of lying dead

[11] Bauer and Zirker, 20.

yet not really being gone from the body could allow Romeo to consider the possibility that Juliet's state of death is not as it appears. A dream about resurrection through love could also teach Romeo to hope that Juliet might arise by the power of *his* love for her. However, while Romeo can think about his resurrection by the miraculous aid of Juliet, he cannot imagine or prepare for Juliet's own resurrection. Juliet in the meeting sonnet wants to see herself not as a miraculous saint, but as Romeo's equal, a fellow pilgrim. Romeo wants Juliet to help him gain a new spiritual life, but at the crucial moment he is incapable of recognizing *her* life, physical or spiritual. He is unable to exchange their roles in the dream and use his experience of consciousness in death and miraculous resurrection through love to question Juliet's death or to hope for Juliet's resurrection. Because Romeo perceives Juliet as a saint and persistently constructs poetic distance between her and himself, he is unable to see the evidence that Juliet is alive and therefore unable to contribute to her resurrection from the tomb.

The end of Romeo's failure in perception is the final consummation of the meeting sonnet: kisses with corpses. In the sonnet, Saint Juliet's implied corpsehood was allowed to recede into the background when the lovers kissed. In the tomb, however, Romeo kisses Juliet when he fully believes her body to be a corpse:

> Eyes, look your last.
> Arms, take your last embrace. And lips, O you
> The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
> A dateless bargain to engrossing death.
> (5.3.112-115)

Though Juliet is not yet dead during Romeo's amorous farewell, Romeo does not know that. He believes that he is expressing love (with kisses) to a dead body like a saint's in a reliquary. The dead corpse he implied when he insisted on addressing Juliet as a saint is

now before him, and the implications of his attempt to elevate Juliet poetically cannot be brushed aside. Juliet also kisses Romeo when she (correctly) believes him to be a corpse: "I will kiss thy lips. / Haply some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative" (5.3.164-6). Though kissing dead corpses is not what either of the lovers has in mind at the beginning, the image of Juliet's dead, sainted hand that touches the pilgrim's hand becomes an inadvertent prophecy of the coming tomb scene, when both Juliet and Romeo find themselves choosing to kiss corpses.

The kisses in the tomb are not only a chilling visual contrast with the kiss at the end of the sonnet, but they are also a reversal of its potential for spiritual significance. Bauer and Zirker argue that when Juliet and Romeo kiss each other in the tomb, they are acting on the desire to unite their souls: "Just as the soul leaves the dying body in a breath, the kiss may be a way in which interanimation is realized," and "By their kisses they want to establish a further connection, an exchange of their souls, and a new life in death."[12] Such a reading is consistent with the more positive interpretation of the kiss at the end of the sonnet—that Romeo approaches the spiritual transcendence he sees in Juliet by joining their souls in a physical kiss. It is also consistent with Pietro Bembo's explanation in *The Courtier* of kisses as the spiritual lover's communion with the beloved's soul, where the kiss is "the opening of mutual access to their souls, which, being each drawn by desire for the other, pour themselves each into the other's body by turn, and mingle so together that each of them has two souls."[13] However, this spiritual reading of the kisses in the tomb is complicated by both lovers' beliefs that they are

[12] Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, "Sites of Death as Sites of Interaction in Donne and Shakespeare," *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*, ed. Judith H. Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 23-24.
[13] Castiglione, 253.

kissing dead bodies, whose souls have already departed. Romeo and Juliet are each thinking about their own deaths, not each other's souls, when they kiss one another in the tomb. Romeo wants to seal his own bargain with death by kissing Juliet's corpse, and Juliet wants to find poison for her own suicide by kissing Romeo's. It is true that they want to join one another by dying, yet both the kisses in the tomb highlight the present separation between the lovers when each one in turn believes that he or she is kissing a soulless corpse. The beloved's body (as Romeo believes incorrectly, Juliet correctly) no longer houses a soul that can come out to meet the living lover's soul in a kiss.[14] The kiss at the end of the sonnet can be read as an exalted moment of spiritual communion between the two lovers, but the kisses in the tomb serve only to emphasize separation and death.

Romeo's Neoplatonic Petrarchism implies this separation and death from the beginning because it elevates Juliet to otherworldly sainthood as her lover's conduit to transcendence. Because Romeo thinks of Juliet as more than human, he fails in the tomb to see how he can help her continue to live. To Romeo, the Petrarchan lover, Juliet's saintly, superhuman essence is enough to explain why she still looks alive and beautiful without further investigation of her physical condition. She is Juliet: For Romeo, she is and will always be the embodiment of radiance and beauty—as Castiglione says that she should. For Romeo, no explanation of Juliet is necessary or even possible. Bembo in *The Courtier* calls the love of a beautiful woman "a step by which to mount to a love far more

[14] See Ramie Targoff, 24-29 on the practice of joint burial and the ambiguous motives for placing bodies together for posthumous companionship without reference to the souls of the dead couple. In Targoff's reading, the play denies the value of joint burial as well as both spiritual and physical hopes of an afterlife for the lovers, and thus draws its emotional power from the final mortality of love.

sublime," where the lover learns to behold "the wide sea of pure divine beauty."[15] Stanley Wells notes that both Shakespeare and John Donne, "seeking to express their sense of what love means, speak of it in metaphysical, religious terms of 'soul' and 'spirit', as a transcendental state of being which reaches earthly fruition in sexual union." Romantic and sexual love is, for these writers, a way that humans "can attain to the communion of the gods."[16] Juliet, immeasurably elevated above Romeo and everything else in the world, is a saint to him in that she mediates his access to what is transcendent. Yet Romeo's perception of Juliet as an immortal being far above the world of living human creatures is what keeps Juliet from living at all in the end.

## 4.2 The Statues and Juliet's Petrarchan Representation

The implications of Juliet's sainthood and of Petrarchan poetry continue to work out even after the deaths of the lovers, when Montague and Capulet pledge to build memorial statues of Juliet and Romeo. The fathers' conversation about the statues echoes elements of the meeting sonnet and revisits its questions of poetic representation. In Romeo's first line to Juliet, he calls her a shrine, and she negotiates, desiring instead to be represented in the poem as a living person capable of speech. In the final scene of the play, Romeo's father pledges to re-create Juliet as a statue memorializing true love, but Juliet can no longer debate the way she is interpreted by others after her death. When Montague pledges to build her statue, Juliet is reduced to the dead, symbolic artifice she tried to avoid becoming in the meeting sonnet. In almost the final lines of the play, Capulet and

[15] Castiglione, 255, 256.
[16] Wells, Stanley, *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5-6.

Montague pledge to build the memorial statues after hearing the story of their dead children's love:

> CAPULET
> O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
> This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
> Can I demand.
>
> MONTAGUE But I can give thee more;
> For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
> That whiles Verona by that name is known,
> There shall no figure at such rate be set
> As that of true and faithful Juliet.
>
> CAPULET
> As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,
> Poor sacrifices of our enmity!
> (5.3.296-304)

Montague offers to build a statuary monument of Juliet, and the scene evokes Juliet's struggle *not* to be a lifeless icon in the meeting sonnet. In a way, the lovers have already constructed Juliet as an icon in the meeting sonnet by making her a saint whom Romeo the pilgrim can touch. Yet in the meeting sonnet, the lovers negotiate how to build a poetic representation of Juliet, and by her own poetic efforts Juliet becomes a saint with a speaking part in the poetic drama. Here, Montague simply declares his intent to build a physical representation of Juliet, and she cannot challenge his representation because she is already dead.

In Montague and Capulet's plan, the lovers both become passive statues for other people to look at and attach their own meanings to, just like the absent lady in Petrarchan love poetry. With the beloved lady absent (or dead), the Petrarchan lover builds his own

fantasy version of her, unchecked by the external reality of her will.[17] When Juliet is able to speak with Romeo, she challenges his artistic vision of her and guides him toward poetic and social interactions more in line with her own wishes. But when Juliet is dead, her father and father-in-law get to construct an artistic version of Juliet and decide what it *means*. Romeo, too, becomes someone else's art like the absent lady in Petrarchan poetry. The loss of Juliet and Romeo is not only loss of life and love, but of poetic power: When Juliet and Romeo die, they are posthumously made into someone else's representational art and no longer have the power to negotiate their own meanings through language.

Regardless of Juliet and Romeo's intentions, the fathers appropriate meaning in the lovers' deaths to mark the ending of the feud. As the fathers agree to build the statues collaboratively, they blur the distinctions between Montague and Capulet that the families have previously enforced with violence. Albright claims that the two rival families fought for nothing but differentiation in the first place. He picks up the very first line of the play, which describes the Montagues and Capulets as "Two households both alike in dignity" (P.1) and contends that the families cannot get along because they are too much alike for comfort. "[A]mong exact equals," Albright continues, "preeminence by definition does not exist; and so two honorable men, trapped in an unhappy state of identicality, will continually seek out, by various useless challenges, some basis for

[17] See Petrarch, trans. Cooke, 50.63-67, where the speaker wishes to sculpt the lady's image imperishably in his mind, 20, where the speaker sets out to praise Laura's beauty but ends up lost in his own thought processes and does not describe her at all, 78 on a painting of the lady and the speaker's wish to be like Pygmalion, 183 and 184 for the speaker's rapid change between considering the lady morally good or evil depending on his own feelings, 215.11 in which she has "un atto che parla con silentio" ("a comportment that, with silence, speaks"), which leaves it up to the poet's imagination what she says, and 278, 281, 285, 302, 342, 346, 356, 359, and 362, where the speaker describes comforting visions of the lady's care for him after she is dead and does not have a say.

establishing relative rank."[18] If Albright is correct, then this final exchange of identities around the building of the monument is an even deeper sign of reconciliation than Capulet and Montague understand: it shows that they are finally learning to tolerate being the same. Capulet and Montague know that to some degree they are switching places when they propose to build the monument. Montague will have Juliet's image made, and Capulet will provide Romeo's. Bauer and Zirker argue that the statues symbolize the continued unity of the two lovers because Montague and Capulet "enact an exchange as each does not erect a statue for his own child but for his former enemy's: Montague for Juliet and Capulet for Romeo. The lovers' union in life as well as in death is therefore indicated by sepulchral statues."[19] This arrangement, I argue, is the closest that they can get to the expected product of a fruitful marriage between Romeo and Juliet—common grandchildren between Montague and Capulet. The grandchildren would have been a physical manifestation of their houses' unity. They would have been people made by Montagues but looking like Capulets, and made by Capulets but looking like Montagues. This is what the statues are: A Montague makes the image of a Capulet, and a Capulet makes the image of a Montague.

In a further manifestation of their newfound unity, Montague and Capulet also trade places by a reversed reenactment of their children's first meeting, though they

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[18] Albright, 37. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). Jameson says that knights in the Romance genre fight not because they are different but because they are alike: "Romance in its original strong form may then be understood as an imaginary 'solution' to this real contradiction, a symbolic answer to the perplexing question of how my enemy can be thought of as being evil (that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute difference), when what is responsible for his being so characterized is quite simply the identity of his own conduct with mine, the which—points of honor, challenges, tests of strength—he reflects as in a mirror image" (118).

[19] Bauer and Zirker, 25.

cannot be aware of the lovers' actions in the meeting sonnet. Montague, like Juliet in the meeting sonnet, transfers a living hand into a statue. Capulet asks for Montague's hand, and in response, Montague promises the monument. This exchange echoes the earlier moment when Romeo touches Juliet's hand, and in response, Juliet metaphorically turns herself into a statuary icon with the line "saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch" (1.4.212). Capulet initiates the exchange by extending his hand, just as Romeo initiated the lovers' first conversation by reaching out to touch Juliet. Montague responds with a proposal to make an artful statue of Juliet, just as Juliet responds with artful poetry that construed her as a statue (if only as an intermediate step to becoming Romeo's fellow pilgrim). The reconciling fathers, then, reenact a tiny piece of the lovers' first exchange, but crosswise—Capulet plays Romeo Montague, and Montague plays Juliet Capulet. In building the statues, Montague and Capulet project their later reconciliation back onto Juliet and Romeo's love affair.

The statues represent not the meanings Juliet and Romeo might express for their own lives, but various other meanings simplified and attached by their parents and by those who will visit the statues later. For Montague and Capulet, the statues are about the end of the "ancient grudge" (P.3) between their families, even though Juliet and Romeo did not share Friar Laurence's ambitious motive of healing the feud through their love. The statues will also commemorate the children's faithful love, which the parents would have been unlikely to recognize as virtuous had the love been discovered earlier. According to Montague, Juliet's statue will commemorate her virtue, which is not piety or charity as such, but faithfulness in love to his son Romeo. She will be known as "true and faithful Juliet" (5.3.302). But there also is an element of pride in Montague's plan as

well—"There shall no figure at such rate be set" as Juliet's statue, which he will deck "in pure gold" (5.3.299-301). To Montague, Juliet's statue represents faithfulness in love and the end of the feud, but it is also a boast of Montague's wealth. In the balcony scene, Romeo called Juliet the precious "merchandise" for which he would sail "the farthest sea" (2.1.126-27), but Juliet preferred to be the bountiful and dynamic sea itself (2.1.176-78), not a treasure to be admired and collected. In building the gold image of Juliet, Montague interprets her according to his own wishes and makes her exactly the lifeless treasure that she does not wish to be.

Because the monuments Montague and Capulet propose to build recreate Romeo's first pilgrimage to Juliet in the meeting sonnet without Juliet's resistance, Juliet also becomes the saint's icon that she does not wish to be. The monument is to be famous as long as the city lasts, and if it is a famously beautiful monument to love, it will attract secular pilgrims to come and see it. If these secular pilgrims reach out their hands to touch Juliet's image, then we have come full circle and find ourselves back where we started with "Saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch" (1.4.212)—only the material icon really is all there is of Juliet this time and cannot talk back.

Juliet and Romeo's relationship begins and ends with statuary. Romeo starts by imagining that his hand has touched a shrine, and eventually he and Juliet both become a statuary shrine to love. Juliet's statue in the end is indeed a monument to the martyrdom of love because the Petrarchan Neoplatonic qualities of Romeo's love lead to her death. Romeo and Juliet are "sacrifices of [their parents'] enmity" (5.3.304), but also of their own flawed attempts to love each other in a limiting social structure and a dysfunctional poetic idiom.

## 4.3 Critique of Petrarchism and Neoplatonic Love

By making spiritualized love poetry a cause of the lover's deaths, Shakespeare points out the dangers of Petrarchan love poetry and the corresponding Neoplatonic theory of spiritual ascent through love. While many other factors also contribute to the lovers' deaths, in a sense, Juliet is killed by a genre. From her first encounter with Romeo, Romeo's poetic attempts to elevate and spiritualize her also imply her death. In the tomb, it is because he perceives Juliet as a saint that Romeo fails to recognize that she is alive, which in turn leads to his suicide and Juliet's decision to end her own life in turn rather than face her parents' hostility alone. The dysfunctions of Petrarchan poetry lead to Juliet's death, and while Juliet is aware of some of the problems with Romeo's discourse and mounts a poetic resistance in her dialogues with Romeo at the meeting sonnet and the balcony scene, her resistance is not enough to keep Petrarchan poetry from killing her.

The Petrarchan poet is such a dangerous lover because he creates a woman who is superhuman and whose divine life is untouched by human concerns. She is so unlike him that he can no longer hope to understand her. This is the sonneteer's idea of a compliment and Castiglione's idea of transcendent love. But Juliet (and perhaps many of the ladies who do not get to reply when addressed in similar Petrarchan poems) would prefer to be a human being who can hope for mutual understanding in conversations with her lover. The Neoplatonic canonization of the beloved lady both assumes and perpetuates an unbridgeable separation between her and her lover. While Petrarchan poetry is capable of great lyric beauty, Shakespeare points out in *Romeo and Juliet* that its premise of separation can be destructive to relationships, and indeed, to lives.

While Petrarchan poetry is often ridiculed on artistic grounds or called out as insincere flattery, in *Romeo and Juliet,* Shakespeare considers a Petrarchan lover who believes what he says. In a more typical anti-Petrarchan vein, Shakespeare recognizes the problems of insincerity and aesthetic excess in his well-known anti-blazon, Sonnet 130:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red.
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes there is more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
> I grant I never saw a goddess go:
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.[20]

Here, Shakespeare makes the speaker a lover who eschews lofty comparisons in order to mock the cynical flatterer who deliberately belies the appearance of his lady with elaborate metaphors. In *Romeo and Juliet*, by contrast, Shakespeare considers a lover who really does believe that his lady is a conduit to the divine, and it turns out that the poet who *believes* that his flatteries truly apply to his lady is vastly more dangerous than the idle Petrarchan flatterer.

Indeed, the ideal Neoplatonic lover described in *The Courtier* achieves spiritual enlightenment for himself, but it is unclear whether his love is good for the lady whose beauty he uses in the first steps of his ascent. Though the chaste spiritual lover will not ruin the lady's reputation and prospects through illicit sex, he is nevertheless still

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[20] Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2009), 1712.

exploiting her for his own purposes without regard for her future. The lady disappears from his enlightened vision when the spiritual lover no longer needs her:

> And thus he will no longer contemplate the particular beauty of one woman, but that universal beauty which adorns all bodies; and so, dazzled by this greater light, he will not concern himself with the lesser, and, burning with a better flame, he will feel little esteem for what at first he so greatly prized.[21]

This Petrarchan ideal leaves the woman herself devalued after the lover has progressed in his spiritual ascent. She is no longer important—no longer even worthy of the enlightened lover's esteem—when he has achieved it. He grows out of her. Though the spiritual lover is supposed to be different from the carnal lover, when Bembo describes the risk that those who physically "satisfy their unchaste desires with the women they love" will afterwards "feel satiety and tedium or conceive a hatred for the beloved object," it does not sound so different from the way that the spiritual lover abandons his particular lady after using her beauty to achieve his vision.[22] Though the spiritual lover in Bembo's ideal is not taking advantage of the beautiful woman carnally, he is more insidiously using her for his spiritual development and discarding her.

Dante similarly has less need of Beatrice as he ascends further up the heavenly spheres in *Paradiso*—though Dante appears less crassly self-serving than Castiglione's spiritual lover because Beatrice responds positively and because Dante's spiritual enlightenment is portrayed in more loving detail. Dante no longer looks at Beatrice when she has helped him scale the heavenly spheres far enough that there are better things to

[21] Castiglione, 255.
[22] Castiglione, 244.

engage his attention. In the sphere of the sun, Dante turns his attention to God and momentarily forgets Beatrice, his beloved guide:

> No mortal heart was ever so disposed
> to worship, or so quick to yield itself
> to God with all its gratefulness, as I
> was when I heard those words, and all my love
> was so intent on Him that Beatrice
> was then eclipsed within forgetfulness.

It is Beatrice who has brought Dante to this place of particular receptivity to God, where her own beauty and Dante's love for her can be thus eclipsed. But Beatrice, unlike the beautiful woman in *The Courtier*, knowingly acts as a spiritual guide to Dante, and she is dead and in heaven, with no need for Dante's esteem. She wants him to think about God rather than about her: "But not displeased by this, she smiled, and my / rapt mind was split."[23] Beatrice, ever the teacher, is pleased with her pupil's progress when he loses himself in communion with God and does not need to think about her.

While the beautiful woman in Castiglione's scheme is a passive stepping stone used by the spiritual lover on his quest for enlightenment, Beatrice is an active spiritual teacher who works for Dante's good; further, she herself already enjoys the spiritual good she seeks for Dante, whereas in *The Courtier*, the beautiful woman's own spiritual state is hardly relevant. The woman's physical beauty is the means by which the spiritual lover comes to his transcendence, yet there is disagreement and discussion about whether physical beauty and moral goodness are always coterminous.[24] In a role reversal from Dante the pilgrim and Beatrice the spiritual guide, the male lover in *The Courtier* serves

[23] Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso* 10.55-63.
[24] Castiglione, 246-249.

as the beloved woman's moral guardian even though her beauty inspires his spiritual ascent:

> Let him take care therefore not to allow her to fall into any error, but through admonishment and good precepts let him always seek to lead her to modesty, temperance, and true chastity, and see to it that no thoughts arise in her except those that are pure and free of all blemish and vice; and thus, by sowing virtue in the garden or her fair mind, he will gather fruits of the most beautiful behavior, and will taste them with wondrous delight.[25]

In a familiar metaphor, the woman is a garden for the lover to enjoy and cultivate, but in his care for her moral wellbeing here, the lover is even supposed to control his lady's thoughts. Beatrice, in contrast, is the moral authority as well as the spiritual inspiration in her relationship with Dante. But in *The Courtier*'s pattern for love, even as the lady's physical beauty inspires the lover's spiritual ascent, he still needs to exercise moral authority over her. The ideal Neoplatonic lover does not value the woman for her own moral virtues or spiritual vision, but for her physical beauty's capacity to inspire him both morally (to better behavior) and spiritually (to an apprehension of transcendent, divine beauty).

By writing Juliet as a woman who objects to being loved as a spiritual conduit, Shakespeare exposes the flaws already present in Petrarchan and Neoplatonic love. Though the spiritual type of love Castiglione describes and Petrarch's poetry embodies may appear to be far more noble than other kinds of love, *Romeo and Juliet* reveals that it can be just as exploitative and even more dangerous than mundane forms of love. Love that aspires to spiritual enlightenment can be far more insidious than love that aims merely for physical or social satisfactions. Some, however, have seen *Romeo and Juliet*

[25] Castiglione, 252.

as a play that uncritically embodies the spirit of Petrarchan love poetry. Colie claims that while "there is plenty of criticism of the love-language" on aesthetic grounds, the critique remains superficial and "never points to the morality beneath the conventions." At the root, Colie argues, "the sonnet-ethos is affirmed unquestioned" in *Romeo and Juliet*.[26] I argue instead that the figure of Juliet—who is, to borrow Americanist Judith Fetterley's phrase, a "resisting reader" of Petrarchism—makes *Romeo and Juliet* a play that deftly and damningly criticizes the very poetic medium in which its characters excel.[27] Miola, minimizing this criticism of Petrarchism, contrasts the treatments of Petrarchism in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, he claims, the characters learn "the inadequacy of rhetorical conventions, including Petrarchan ones," but "Shakespeare's encounter with Italian love poetry reaches a profound culmination in *Romeo and Juliet*" where instead, "sadly and gloriously, two lovers translate Petrarchan rhetoric into tragic reality."[28] I argue that Shakespeare shows the tragic ending to be an intrinsic *result* of the Petrarchan mode, and though the play appreciates the aesthetic potential of Neoplatonic Petrarchism, it remains more a warning than a celebration.

Juliet is a "resisting reader" of Petrarchism while she is alive because she can see that even though her metaphorical sainthood might make for beautiful poetry, it is fundamentally harmful to her existence as a living woman and as a lover. When Juliet dies in the tomb despite her brilliant poetic resistance, Shakespeare shows how dangerous Petrarchan poetry and Neoplatonic love can be. Both Juliet's resistance and her death

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[26] Colie, 166. Colie contrasts *Romeo and Juliet* with *Othello*, which she says does make a more layered critique of the ideology of love poetry.
[27] Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[28] Miola, 43. Miola does not substantially examine the link between "Petrarchan rhetoric" and "tragic reality."

illuminate dangers to beloved women that were already present in the Petrarchan poetic tradition and in the theory of Neoplatonic love.

## 4.4 Juliet as Moral Center and Disruptive Poet

Though Juliet refuses to be the Neoplatonic spiritual conduit Romeo at first wants her to be, she nevertheless does act as the moral center of the play, disrupting other authorities. Romeo wants to revere Juliet as the passive catalyst for his transformation, but when she talks back to him in the meeting sonnet, she guides him toward a more mutual and open kind of poetic interaction with her. Juliet is not the kind of spiritual figure Romeo expects, but she is both the focal point of numinous aspiration and the standard of morally right behavior in the play.

A look at Friar Laurence, who ostensibly *should* be the wise and righteous spiritual guide the young lovers need, only confirms that Juliet is the spiritual and moral center of the play. Though Friar Laurence is Romeo's "ghostly father," (2.2.45), when we first meet him he is earthbound, looking downward to gather herbs (2.2.1-30). He is bent toward the ground in the pre-dawn darkness (2.2.5), neither looking upward physically nor (according to the speech we overhear about the properties of plants) directing his mind upward to God in prayer or contemplation. Laurence must look particularly dull and earthly to Romeo, who has just been looking upward at Juliet on the balcony and wondering at her celestial radiance.

Laurence's actions are no more heavenly-minded than his appearance, and his moral failure is particularly apparent when he lacks the fortitude to uphold his intentions

of healing the feud. While Juliet's virtue of constancy is celebrated at the end of the play ("true and faithful Juliet" (5.3.302)), Laurence lacks the strength of will to hold to his purpose in the face of difficulty. Laurence doubts Romeo's sincerity and maturity in abandoning Rosaline and choosing to marry Juliet, yet he agrees to perform the marriage in the practical hope of reconciling the families (2.2.87-92). In some ways Laurence's attempt to heal the feud seems like a noble act: The feud has caused and continues to cause a great deal of harm to the people for whom Laurence is meant to be a caretaker and spiritual guide. Stopping the feud would not only stop the violence which materially harms so many people, but it would also lessen the sins of pride, envy, and wrath committed by Laurence's spiritual charges who are taking part in the feud. Yet when maintaining Juliet and Romeo's marriage becomes difficult, Laurence lacks the fortitude to take moral responsibility for his own actions or to go forward with his intention to work for reconciliation through the marriage. After Juliet and Romeo are married and Romeo has gone into exile for killing Tybalt, Paris asks Laurence to perform the wedding between him and Juliet. Laurence mumbles objections (4.1.1-17) but does not refuse outright to perform the marriage, and Paris leaves believing that the marriage will take place (4.1.41-43). Though Friar Laurence would be in the wrong if he performed a marriage for someone whom he knows is already married (because he himself performed the first marriage), instead of steadfastly refusing to do it, he convinces Juliet to attempt the dangerous scheme of using the sleeping potion.

When bigamy with Paris is imminent, Laurence does not take courageous action himself but instead abuses his moral authority as a confessor to make Juliet take the fall for him. Laurence's good intentions crumble in the face of opposition, and instead of

braving the social danger of admitting what he did and attempting to shield Juliet, he counsels Juliet to brave mortal danger in his place. Laurence does not discuss any other options with Juliet before recommending the sleeping potion—perhaps because the most obvious option is one that would be difficult for him. He could take responsibility for the marriage and say that Juliet and Romeo were young and foolish, that he used the couple with the good intent of making peace but overstepped his bounds, and that the marriage was ill-advised but is nevertheless lawful, and Juliet therefore may be punished or confined but cannot be made to marry Paris. Such a confession would certainly come at great personal cost to Friar Laurence, but it would be the right thing to do. Laurence, however, does not exercise the fortitude to fulfill a high moral calling of self-sacrifice. Instead, he puts Juliet in danger and uses his status as a moral authority to get her to follow his plan.

In this context, the way that Laurence pressures Juliet into the sleeping potion scheme is particularly infuriating because it reveals Laurence's hypocrisy. He advises Juliet this way about the benefits and difficulty of the potion plan:

> And this shall free thee from this present shame,
> If no inconstant toy or womanish fear
> Abate thy valour in the acting it.
> (4.1.118-20)

To make Juliet feel the burden of guilt, Laurence characterizes her present circumstances as shameful even though Juliet is lawfully married (by Laurence's own authority) and remains faithful to her spouse. Masking his own lack of courage, he manipulatively calls on Juliet to be brave. Even worse, he uses her gender against her when he implies that she will be womanishly "inconstant" (both unsteady in her plans and unfaithful to Romeo) if

she fails to do as he advises. Laurence oppressively uses both his position as a religious authority and the misogynist concept of women as weak-minded so that Juliet will feel she must prove her constancy—when Laurence's own lack of constancy is the reason she is called on to take such drastic measures in the first place.[29] Laurence does not follow the example or the colorfully phrased advice of Chaucer's Parson against clerical hypocrisy. The Parson is one who "first…wroghte, and afterward he taught," whereas Laurence tries to teach virtues he has failed to practice in his own life. The Parson warns that a priest should beware of the "shame" of having "A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep."[30] Friar Laurence, however, preaches the exact virtues to Juliet that he fails to exercise himself, and in doing so he fails in his pastoral duty to protect a vulnerable member of his flock. Friar Laurence begins with some good intentions of healing the feud, but he is more than ready to shift responsibility to Juliet when things become difficult. By placing *Romeo and Juliet* in a Catholic setting, Shakespeare is able to challenge religious authority without directly challenging the religious authorities dominant in his own place and time—the Friar fails as a moral authority, but Protestant clergy and censors would not immediately have to see themselves in his failings. Despite his status as a priest, Laurence fails to provide a sound moral center for the play because he is a hypocrite who lacks the fortitude to follow through with his good intentions.

Laurence's moral failing despite his position of authority highlights the contrasting virtue of Juliet, who exercises the fortitude to maintain her commitments

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[29] Novy, 107, argues that the Friar's misogyny contributes to the tragedy because he considers femininity inherently weak and "encourages Juliet to pretend obedience and death through his potion rather than helping her escape to Romeo."

[30] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The General Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 497, 503-504.

despite painful consequences to herself. Until Laurence convinces her to pretend to accept the marriage, Juliet is on course to protest it and deny her consent (3.5.112-201). Even when Capulet threatens violent coercion (3.5.154) and says that he will throw Juliet out to "die in the streets" (3.5.192), Juliet does not waver in her resolve to remain faithful to Romeo and refuse a new marriage to Paris. After her parents have stormed off, Juliet expresses her moral dilemma to her nurse:

> O God! O Nurse, how shall this be prevented?
> My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven.
> How shall that faith return again to earth,
> Unless that husband send it me from heaven
> By leaving earth? Comfort me, counsel me.
> (3.5.204-208)

Juliet cannot marry another man while Romeo is still alive. It is not just her own wishes that go against marrying Paris, but her faithful promise made to heaven and to Romeo, and rather than betray her commitment, she is willing to endure the very considerable distress that her parents have power to inflict on her.

In maintaining her commitment to Romeo and her marriage vows, Juliet not only stands up to the cruelty of her parents but also to the morally lax kindness of her Nurse. When Juliet's nurse, who has been her closest confidante until this point, responds by suggesting that Juliet should forget about her marriage vows and her commitment to Romeo for the sake of expediency, Juliet finds herself truly without an ally. The nurse holds neither Juliet's ideals of love nor Juliet's strict moral code. "Then since the case so stands as now it does," she advises, "I think it best you married with the County [Paris]" (3.5.216-17). The nurse goes on to praise Paris' physical charms as superior to Romeo's and to say that Romeo is effectively dead, and so Juliet is free from the marriage

(3.5.218-225). Juliet wonders whether the Nurse's disloyalty to Romeo or willingness to see Juliet's marriage vow broken is worse:

> Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,
> Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue
> Which she hath praised him with above compare
> So many thousand times? Go counsellor;
> Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain.
> (3.5.234-240)

Juliet does not expect her parents to be on her side, and though the nurse's betrayal is less harsh than her parents', it comes from someone whom she trusts more. Juliet's parents and her only lifelong companion both push her to marry Paris. Nevertheless, Juliet maintains her commitment to Romeo and her marriage vows even though it means both braving Capulet's threats and rejecting the nurse's comforting moral escape hatch. Unlike Laurence, Juliet has the constancy to stay firm in her purpose despite opposition. Juliet, not Friar Laurence, is both the moral center of the play and the center of spiritual aspiration.

Juliet's constancy and courage indict both the sacred and the secular authority figures in the play. The Prince fares only somewhat better than the Friar. While the Friar is a direct cause of the lover's deaths because of his hypocrisy as a religious authority, the Prince fails to prevent the tragedy as an ineffectual secular authority. Prince Escalus includes himself among those who suffer heaven's punishment in the deaths of Juliet and Romeo:

> Capulet, Montague,
> See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love;
> And I, for winking at your discords, too,
> Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished.
> (5.3.291-295)

Because he failed to use his authority to address the feud earlier, innocent people have died.[31] Both secular and religious authorities contribute to Juliet's death, and Juliet's own fortitude and courage from a position of weakness indict both the Prince and the Friar. Juliet disrupts religious and secular authority by highlighting the Friar's and the Prince's failings, just as Perceval's sister undermines the moral and spiritual insight of Nacien the hermit and the chivalric ideals of King Arthur in the quest for the Holy Grail.

Juliet is the object of Romeo's spiritual quest like the Grail is for Malory's Grail knights. While Romeo does not go on a physical journey as the characters who seek the Grail do, he is nevertheless a person striving for connection with a higher reality, and he believes that he sees his path toward divine connection in Juliet, whom he pictures as a shrine, a saint, and an angel. Juliet, however, does not wish to be the object of Romeo's spiritual quest. She does not want to be a relic at the end of the journey, but rather a fellow pilgrim beside Romeo. Like Perceval's sister, Juliet claims the adventure for herself.

Yet Juliet does not, like Perceval's sister, travel across a fantastic landscape in pursuit of her adventure. She is first confined to the Capulet home and then confined to the Capulet tomb; her adventures are psychological and verbal. Indeed, the inter- and intrapersonal nature of the spiritual questing in the play is part of what makes it a tragedy rather than a comedy. Though Juliet offers to "follow [Romeo] throughout the world" (2.1.191), she does not even get to follow him to Mantua when he is exiled. Juliet is the

[31] Note that Prince Escalus cares more about the deaths of his own kinsmen, Mercutio and Paris, than about the deaths of Juliet and Romeo. Perhaps this favoritism toward his own kin undermines his ability to solve the feud in the first place.

static (if vocally resistant) object of a spiritual quest and does not make a physical pilgrimage.

Her physical confinement reflects her metaphorical confinement within the structures of Petrarchan poetry. The Petrarchan lady is a catalyst for her poet-lover's multifarious psychological developments, but she herself does not grow, move, or change, except when she dies. Juliet neither leaves Verona with Romeo nor pursues after him to Mantua—either of these could move the play into the comic territory of helter-skelter elopements and pursuits. In Juliet's unfulfilled suggestion that she could follow Romeo, there is the echo of Rosaline, Portia, Viola, Helen, and all the women travelers, cross-dressing or not, who journey through Shakespearean landscapes on account of love, friendship, or shipwreck. These physical quests can end happily. There is more room in Shakespeare's physical space than in his psychological space for things to happen to happen alright. But "saints do not move" (2.4.218), and Juliet does not get to escape the implications of the reality that Romeo and she have built for her. Juliet's means of escape from the Petrarchan paradigm are limited.[32]

Because Juliet is immeasurably elevated above her lover in Petrarchan poetry and a Neoplatonic ideal of love, she does not get to live with him. Juliet resists her own exaltation to sainthood for precisely this reason in the meeting sonnet: if she is a shrine, she is not a person who can talk with Romeo at all; if she is a saint rather than a fellow palmer, she is still farther away from him than she wants to be. Even under good circumstances, in the meeting sonnet, Juliet knows that being a metaphorical saint takes

[32] See Honegger, 76 and 84 for more on Juliet's resistance to Petrarchism, which he sees mainly in the balcony scene.

her farther away from genuine interaction with Romeo. Under bad circumstances, in the tomb, the metaphor of sainthood becomes literally lethal. Real saints must die first and be declared saints posthumously; Juliet, on the contrary, must die *because* she has been declared a saint while alive.

Shakespeare represents Juliet as a woman who disrupts the expectations placed on her by her gender and by the genre of Petrarchan poetry. Like Perceval's sister, Juliet exists at the confrontation point of oppression and resistance. Juliet wants to be neither a daughter exchanged in marriage for Montague's social benefit nor a luminous lady exalted to sainthood for Romeo's spiritual benefit. Both of these roles reduce Juliet to a passive bearer of men's goods, whether Montague's future heirs or Romeo's spiritual epiphanies. Juliet instead wants to be Romeo's equal, a fellow pilgrim who can touch him on her own terms and speak to him—not with celestial music like the idealized Petrarchan lady but with intelligible words. She does not want to be the treasure for which he crosses distant seas (2.1.125-27), but the dynamic and bounteous sea itself, already surrounding him (2.1.176-78). Juliet's poetic glimpses of herself offer only a brief and fragmentary alternative to the Petrarchism that does not grant her a speaking role, and she is not allowed to live long enough to forge a new poetics of love. At Juliet's death, other characters impose their own meanings on her as Petrarch does to his dead lady; Romeo sees her as a saint, missing the chance to preserve her life, and Montague makes her a shrine in the end, despite what she wanted in the meeting sonnet. Juliet's death limits the possibilities for her further poetic and spiritual adventures. Yet for a brief while, Juliet understands how love poetry is trying to kill her, and she fights back.

# CONCLUSION. THE VIRTUE OF DISRUPTION

## 5.1 What Could Have Happened

The stories of Perceval's sister and Juliet project unrealized possibilities. While these women characters brilliantly disrupt the oppressive expectations placed on them both by the communities depicted in the fictions they inhabit and by the genres at play in those fictions, they both die without reaching their full spiritual and disruptive potential. Though Sidney wants readers to make the world better by imitating the virtuous characters they find in poetry, the virtue of Perceval's sister largely consists in her death, and Juliet dies as a result of Romeo's poetry despite her virtue and her resistance. These women characters, like Lucretia and so many others, cannot be imitated by women readers who want to survive. The texts only hint at the possibilities should these characters have lived longer. Perceval's sister could reach Sarras alive and share the transcendent vision of the Grail with Sir Galahad, but she doesn't. Juliet could reinvent love poetry as an art of mutuality and live happily and lyrically ever after, but she doesn't.

Instead of speculating further about the unrealized possibilities in these women's fictional lives here, I will turn for illumination to some of the other women's stories that Malory and Shakespeare did write. Malory's Nimue, the damsel of the lake, shares themes of interpretive power with Perceval's sister, and her less subversive story highlights the unique challenge Perceval's sister brings to the patriarchal structures of the *Morte Darthur*. Helen in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* enacts a gender-

reversed Petrarchan spiritual quest for love, and considering Helen's relative success lends further nuance to the question of what goes wrong for Juliet—power as well as poetry matters to Juliet's death. These parallel lives of Nimue and Helen help us to understand how much disruption Perceval's sister and Juliet achieve in their stories and why they cannot do more.

## 5.2 Perceval's Sister and Nimue

Perceval's sister is both an authoritative interpreter and an interpretable object. She explains the relics on the ships and re-envisions the stories of ancient dead women, Eve and Solomon's wife. Yet after her death, she is also a relic of idealized feminine goodness whose story is written and read by the men around her. Perceval's sister interprets the strange writings and ancient events encountered on the supernatural ships, but she becomes another wonder to be interpreted when the male Grail knights write her story and place her corpse on another miraculous ship. On the ship, she will feed Lancelot with Eucharistic manna in his wanderings, and she will eventually reach Sarras to be buried with Galahad and Perceval at the endpoint of the quest for the Grail. Perceval's sister is both an interpreted object and a spiritual guide who forces a reinterpretation of the Grail quest; her main task while alive is to interpret relics and past histories for the Grail knights so that they will know how to pursue their quest.

Nimue the damsel of the lake is in some ways similar to Perceval's sister as a mystical source of knowledge and an interpreter who facilitates the actions of others—yet while Perceval's sister is a disruptive guide, Nimue is an interpreter who continually

affirms the values of Arthur's court, and her own meaning is subordinate to the narrative needs of the chivalric male characters. After she has imprisoned Merlin underground, Nimue takes on Merlin's previous role of revealing identity to make orderly sense of the text and keep protagonists alive. In taking over the order-maintaining aspect of Merlin, Nimue pops up at key moments in the text to sort out difficulties based on her knowledge of characters' identities, and she serves as a helpful interpreter of events when chivalric characters are confused or endangered.

In the case of Pelleas and Ettarde, Nimue resolves a situation which is at an impasse by interpreting the types of characters involved and allotting destinies accordingly, and her judgment supports chivalric values. When the lady Ettarde will not love the knight Pelleas and Pelleas will not stop loving Ettarde, this subplot is stuck. But Nimue enters the scene, interprets the problem, and provides a solution that both moves the plot along and upholds patriarchal values. She deems, "hit is no joy of suche a proude lady that woll nat have no mercy of suche a valyaunte knyght" (135) and proceeds to enchant both the proud lady and the valiant knight for what she deems a just reversal of their love situation (and also, conveniently, to refresh a plot that was going stale). Ettarde now loves Pelleas, and Pelleas now loathes Ettarde. Ettarde is killed off in punishment for not loving a valiant knight who felt entitled to her love in exchange for his valor. Pelleas moves on to obtain the love of Nimue herself as a reward for being such a good knight (106). Thus conventional knightly valor is rewarded with the patriarchal affirmation that a beautiful woman is indeed the rightful possession of a valiant knight. [1]

[1] See Chapter 1, footnote 35 on chivalric society's expectation that women's love is the just reward of successful knighthood.

Nimue also uses her interpretive abilities to save King Arthur, the center of chivalric authority, from harm. When Morgan le Fay sends Arthur a beautiful but murderously enchanted mantle, Arthur focuses on the gift itself, which "pleased hym much." However Nimue instead maintains awareness of the gift's source, Morgan, whose identity is (at this point in the story) defined by treacherous schemes against Arthur. Nimue, instead of being distracted by the shiny jewels on the mantle, turns her attention to the characters of the queen who sends it and the damsel who brings it. Thus, she is able to save Arthur's life by counseling that the damsel who brought the mantle be made to wear it before Arthur does—and when the damsel is forced to wear the mantle, she "fell downe dede and never spoke worde after, and brente to colys" (122). Nimue uses her interpretive abilities to save Arthur and to silence and burn to the ground Morgan's opposition to Arthur's power.

Nimue also exercises her interpretive abilities to the glory of knighthood in the incident where Guenevere is accused of killing an innocent knight by poison. Nimue knows the real story behind the poisoned knight and knows that Guenevere is innocent, but she does not arrive to reveal this knowledge until after Guenevere has nearly been burned for treason and Lancelot has staged a dramatic rescue (800-802). An earlier revelation would have deprived Lancelot of the chance to win worship by fighting and to prove himself the best to the other knights and to Guenevere herself yet again. However, after the rescue, the court remains in non-productive confusion because Guenevere has been saved from death but most of the knights misinterpret the events and still wrongly believe her to be guilty. At this point, Nimue, who "ever . . . ded grete goodnes unto Kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntementes" brings

in her identifying power to correct the knights' perception of the poisoning. Nimue explains "opynly that [Guenevere] was never gylty; and there she disclosed by whom hit was done, and named him, Sir Pynel, and for what cause he did hit; there hit was opynly knowyn and disclosed. And so the quene was excused" (803). Nimue times her revelation so that it brings resolution when needed but does not interfere with Lancelot's chance to win worship through conventional chivalric violence.

Similarly, in the scene where Arthur and his knight Sir Accolon are made to fight each other by Morgan's schemes, Nimue provides useful interpretive help that saves Arthur's life, but she does it in such a way as to reinforce Arthur's chivalric and kingly identity. Accolon and Arthur are both ignorantly duped into fighting one another. "Now I suppose" Accolon brightly observes, that Morgan "hath made all this crauftis and enchauntemente for this batayle" (110). Morgan initiates the battle by concealing the knights' identities, and Nimue turns the battle in Arthur's favor by restoring those identities. Since Morgan has stolen Arthur's royal sword Excalibur, Nimue both restores his kingly identity and gives Arthur a practical chance at recovering in the battle when she magically helps him to regain the sword. Nimue acts because of Arthur's knightly qualities in order to restore the marks of his identity:

> When the Damesell of the Lake behelde Arthure, how full of prouesse his body was, and the false treson that was wrought for hym to have had hym slayne, she had grete peté that so good a knight and such a man of worship sholde so be destroyed. And at the nexte stroke, Sir Accolon stroke at hym such a stroke that by the damesels enchauntemente the swerde Excaliber fell out of Accolon's honde to the erthe, and therewithal Sir Arthure lyghtly lepe to hit and gate it in his honde, and forthwithall he knew hit, that hit was his swerde Excalyber. (113)

Soon after Nimue helps Arthur reclaim Excalibur, Arthur is able to press his advantage, win the battle, and remove Accolon's helmet, which precipitates the revelation of both their identities. This revelation, in turn, ends Morgan's scheme to kill Arthur through concealment and misplacement of identity markers (that is, the knights' failure to recognize each other and Accolon's possession of Excalibur and its scabbard). By restoring Arthur's sword to him, Nimue resolves the deliberate misunderstanding Morgan has created, and she does so in a way that specifically showcases Arthur's identity as the king and his prowess as a knight.

Perceval's sister's function as an interpreter on the mystical ships is in some ways similar to Nimue's role—she reveals identities and explains connections so that the knights can go on with their quest and the plot can continue. Like Nimue, Perceval's sister is a font of hidden knowledge and uses that knowledge to aid Arthur's knights. In some ways, Nimue is the more powerful figure of the two: She wields potent enchantments, her knowledge saves King Arthur's life more than once, and unlike Perceval's sister, Nimue does not die and become an object for others to interpret.

Yet while Nimue's actions typically affirm the violent, patriarchal values of Arthurian chivalry, Perceval's sister fundamentally challenges those values. By refusing to allow the knights rescue her and instead willingly shedding her own blood for the lady of the castle, Perceval's sister undermines the Pentecostal Oath. She denies the knights the ability to affirm their masculinity through violent combat and define themselves as mighty by casting her as a vulnerable woman in need of rescue. Nimue, by contrast, times her revelations in order to allow knights the best opportunities to establish their identity and power in combat.

Part of the reason that Perceval's sister challenges chivalric values where Nimue affirms them is that Perceval's sister appears in The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal and Nimue does not, and the Noble Tale, as I have argued, makes a pattern of critiquing secular knighthood: Yet Perceval's sister also disrupts the misogyny embedded in the values of the Grail quest. Her very presence on the quest challenges the authority of the ban on women issued by Nacien the hermit. Her status as a spiritual authority and her symbolism as a figure of the Eucharist and the Grail place her at the center of the spiritual quest on which women are marginalized from the beginning. When Perceval's sister tells the knights the true story behind the mysterious things they see on the ships, she acts like Nimue by revealing hidden knowledge to help Arthurian knights. But unlike Nimue, Perceval's sister at the same time works against misogyny. Nimue acts to restrain the influence of other women, particularly Morgan and her allies. Perceval's sister, however, tells the histories of the relics on the ships in such a way as to rehabilitate Eve and Solomon's wife, women who have been considered evil in previous tellings of their stories. While Nimue uses her mystical powers to affirm Arthurian patriarchal values and authority figures, Perceval's sister disrupts the oppressively gendered expectations of both secular chivalry and the Grail quest.

## 5.3 Juliet and Helen from *All's Well that Ends Well*

*Romeo and Juliet* is a play in which innumerable things could have gone otherwise for a vastly different outcome.[2] Though I have argued that Romeo's practice of Petrarchan poetry and adherence to a Neoplatonic theory of love lead to the lovers' deaths, the spiritualized quality of Romeo's love is necessarily only part of the story. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, things are allowed to work out comparatively well because even though Petrarchan love conventions are in play, the power dynamics are comically reversed.

Juliet is a socially vulnerable object of spiritualized love, whereas Count Bertram, the object of Helen's love, is an independent and socially powerful figure. In *Romeo and Juliet*, both lovers are vulnerable, in the power of controlling parents as well as difficult social rules. Juliet, the object of Romeo's Petrarchan poetry, is the most vulnerable because she is a young woman who enjoys almost no independence from her parents. She is denied Romeo's physical mobility and peer interactions, and she is coerced with threats of starvation and physical violence toward a bigamous marriage with Paris after Romeo's exile. Juliet, who already lacks autonomy and power in her life, cannot afford to be objectified in Petrarchan poetry. By contrast, Bertram in *All's Well* is rich and independent, and so when Helen admires his beauty and (despite his moral turpitude) makes him into a source of transcendent meaning for her life, the result can be a problem comedy rather than a tragedy.

In *All's Well*, Helen begins the play as a fragmented Petrarchan lover who, much like Romeo, admires a beloved person's physical beauty and makes that person into a

[2] Ryan North's recent adaptation, *Romeo and/or Juliet: A Chooseable-Path Adventure* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016) highlights the play's many alternate paths by allowing readers to experiment with different plot trajectories.

symbol of transcendent realities. Helen—like Romeo, Petrarch, and Castiglione's ideal lover—feels captivated by the beauty of her beloved person, which she experiences visually. When she ponders Bertram's departure from home at the very beginning of the play, she does not mention anything at all that Bertram has done or said. She laments that she will no longer be able to see him, and her complaint shows that she does not just mean *see* in the wider sense of enjoying his company. She literally will miss *looking at* Bertram:

> 'Twas pretty, though a plague,
> To see him every hour, to sit and draw
> His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls
> In our heart's table—heart too capable
> Of every line and trick of his sweet favor.
> (1.1.94-98)[3]

As a Petrarchan lover, Helen also sees herself as a fragmented person. As the play opens, Helen experiences a tension between her ideal of having Bertram and her real life, which has to be entirely separate from that desire. While she still considers her love for Bertram impossible to fulfill, she complains, "Th'ambition in my love thus plagues itself" (1.1.92). Her love is in conflict with herself when she believes that loving Bertram is hopeless and destructive. Like the speaker in many of Petrarch's love poems, she is ambivalent about her love and the pieces of her psyche are locked in argument with one another.[4] Like Romeo, whose poetry divides his hands and lips into separate characters at cross-purposes, Helen begins the play as a fragmented Petrarchan lover.

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[3] William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well,* ed. Susan Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent parenthetical citations of *All's Well* are to this edition.
[4] See Chapter 3, note 44 on fragmentation in Petrarchan poetry.

Bertram, filling the role of the idealized Petrarchan lady, takes on a symbolic value beyond his personal significance and character. Though Bertram is not himself a paragon of psychological, social, or spiritual wellbeing, his lover Helen comes to see him as a symbol of an integrated self, a unified society, and even, like Juliet for Romeo, a transcendent connection with God. Like Romeo, Helen initially sees her beloved person as a heavenly object to be contemplated but not achieved. "'Twere all one," she says,

> That I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it, he is so above me.
> In his bright radiance and collateral light
> Must I be comforted, not in his sphere.
> (1.1.87-91)

Helen imagines that the radiantly beautiful Bertram, like the typical beloved lady in Petrarchan poetry, is unattainable, a heavenly object forever to be admired from a distance. While the Petrarchan lady is often inaccessible because she is married to someone other than the poet, Helen's imagery of the star out of reach indicates that because Bertram is a count and she is only a physician's daughter, marrying him is socially impossible. Bertram moves in the sphere of the stars, and Helen sees herself as not even a planet but a sublunary human stargazer. In another Neoplatonic move, Helen describes her experience of Bertram as radiance and light. Unlike Romeo, however, she does put herself in the picture as a mortal gazing up at the star. In her poetic scene, she does not ignore her own existence or her own relationship to Bertram even though she elevates him to the heavens and emphasizes her social distance from him.

This heavenly imagery is not only about Helen's social distance from Bertram: Her devotion to him also elevates him in religious terms. Bertram is a star that draws Helen's gaze heavenward. Like Romeo, Helen uses the language of devotion to saints

when she talks about the person she loves. Though Romeo calls Juliet a saint before he knows anything about her character, basing his veneration only on his feelings about her physical beauty, Juliet does turn out to be a good person. Bertram, however, is not even a good person, yet he still becomes a symbolic focus for Helen's devotion to higher things. Before Helen decides to follow him to Paris she muses, "But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics" (1.1.99-100). Helen, as a Petrarchan lover, idolizes and sanctifies Bertram.

When Helen becomes a pilgrim to leave France, Bertram is the object of her quest—she physically travels to search for him and she also centers her spiritual aspirations on him. Though she claims in her departure letter to be "Saint Jacques' pilgrim" (3.4.4), she also requests that Bertram's mother "Bless him [Bertram] at home in peace, whilst I from far / His name with zealous fervor sanctify" (3.4.10-11). Bertram becomes an object of devotion not because of intrinsic saintliness, but because Helen wants to see the person she loves as a saint worthy of all her fervor. Like many Petrarchan lovers who place their own imaginative needs above the beloved ladies' actions and feelings, Helen temporarily ignores Bertram's character and behavior because *she* wants a saint. Romeo insists on Juliet's sainthood despite her desire to be seen as a fellow pilgrim instead, and Helen insists on Bertram's sainthood despite his unvirtuous character.

And yet, even though many of Helen's poetic moves are the same as Romeo's, her spiritual objectification of Bertram does not leave anyone dead. While her marriage to Bertram is a dubiously happy ending given what we know of his character, it is what Helen wants and it is what Helen achieves. Helen's spiritualized love for Bertram may

lead to bitter disappointments in the hypothetical later years she will spend with him, but within the play it ends well enough.

If my earlier argument about the role of Petrarchan poetry in Juliet's death appeared to be a simplistic accusation like those made in the game *Clue*—"Juliet was murdered by Petrarchan poetry in the Capulet tomb with the saint metaphor"—then *All's Well* is a needed counter to that simplicity. The culprit is not simply Petrarchan poetry but Petrarchan poetry coupled with the social system which disempowers Juliet.

The reasons for Juliet's death that matter are Romeo's poetry and Capulet's possessiveness, and neither of these exists in a vacuum. Both Romeo's Petrarchan poetry and Capulet's parental authoritarianism are manifestations of a patriarchal culture that, whether it appears to elevate women or denigrate them, sees women primarily in terms of the benefits they can confer on men. This doubleness of patriarchy is what kills Juliet, though there are also many reasons in the plot: unwise decisions, and Friar Laurence's irresponsible bullying, and plague quarantines, and a host of other accidents. After Mercutio's death, the myriad tragic corollaries of Murphy's Law rush into play. If a letter can get lost, it will get lost. A trusted friend will not be where he is supposed to be. If bad timing can kill you, you're already dead. Yet the reasons for Juliet's death that matter most are the combined effects of Capulet's patriarchal claim to own Juliet and Romeo's Petrarchan desire to elevate her to sainthood for his own spiritualized love quest. For someone in Juliet's place, being a human is hard enough and being a saint is deadly.

Juliet's humanity, then, is assailed from both sides, and her resistance is double-sided as well. Capulet wants her to be less than human, a possession he can give away or sell as he wishes. Romeo wants her to be more than human, a saint who will help him

achieve spiritual vision. In today's terms, Capulet (in the dramatic tradition of possessive fathers) embodies hostile sexism, while Romeo (in the Petrarchan tradition of Neoplatonic love poetry) embodies benevolent sexism. Juliet resists both of their expectations about her womanhood and works to negotiate a human role for herself. By writing Juliet as a disruptive spiritual guide who resists being made property and being made a saint alike, Shakespeare illuminates the double nature of patriarchal control, revealing the oppressive implications of Petrarchan love poetry.

## 5.4 Disruption and Delightful Teaching

Authors today do not usually write fiction with the intent that readers should pattern their lives after those of the characters and thereby become virtuous. The extent to which writers did so even in Sidney's time is debatable. Sidney says in the *Defense of Poesy* that literature teaches virtue better than history does because it can better show virtue rewarded and vice punished:

> For indeed poetry ever sets virtue out in her best colours, making Fortune her well-waiting handmaid, that one must needs be enamoured of her. Well may you see Ulysses in a storm, and in many other hard plights; but they are all but exercises of patience and magnanimity, to make them shine the more in the near-following prosperity. And of the contrary part, if evil men come to the stage, they ever go out (as the tragedy writer answered to one that misliked the show of such persons) so manacled as they little animate folks to follow them. But the history, being captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness.[5]

Here Sidney would seem to agree with Oscar Wilde's naively moralistic governess character, Miss Prism, who says that in her three-volume novel, "The good ended

[5] Sidney, *Defense*, 225.

happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."[6] Such a narrowly didactic concept of fiction's meaning leaves little place for Perceval's sister and Juliet, good characters who meet untimely ends. Yet in Sidney's own fiction, the *Arcadia*, virtuous characters die horribly, and the impossibly fortunate and successful protagonists are sometimes far from virtuous. The delightful teaching literature does is much more complicated in practice, even Sidney's own practice, than it is in the *Defense.*

Yet at the same time, readers do find meaning in the lives of literary characters. We find this meaning not so much in whether these characters succeed or fail but in what they attempt and why. We find it in the brief moments of spiritual clarity soon obscured by confusion or by death. We find it in the tensions, the contradictions, and the disruptions that come when a character finds herself at odds with the world where she lives her imaginary life.

We find it in characters like Perceval's sister and Juliet, who in their different ways refuse to be absorbed into the stories of the men around them. Perceval's sister is placed on the margins of the quest by the chivalric and spiritual misogyny that cast her as a woman who must be rescued by secular knights and shunned as a physical temptation by spiritual knights; she disrupts these expectations by moving to the center of the quest as a spiritual authority and a symbol of the Holy Grail. Juliet, however, begins as the object of Romeo's spiritual quest, and she disrupts Petrarchan expectations by working for her place as a living pilgrim at Romeo's side rather than a dead relic at the end of his pilgrimage. Perceval's sister establishes her own authority and vindicates other women

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[6] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* in *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (New York: Signet Classics, 1985), 143.

by narrating ancient stories, and Juliet negotiates her humanity by talking back to Romeo in lyric poetry. Perceval's sister and Juliet are both literary creations of their male authors, but they are both represented as women who wield authorial power themselves to disrupt the generic and gendered expectations placed on them. If, as Sidney hopes, they are spiritual guides who lead readers to be virtuous, then what they teach is the virtue of disruption.

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# VITA

καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ ὁμιλεῖν αὐτοὺς καὶ συζητεῖν καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς ἐγγίσας συνεπορεύετο αὐτοῖς, οἱ δὲ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτῶν ἐκρατοῦντο τοῦ μὴ ἐπιγνῶναι αὐτόν. … καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ κατακλιθῆναι αὐτὸν μετ᾽ αὐτῶν λαβὼν τὸν ἄρτον εὐλόγησεν καὶ κλάσας ἐπεδίδου αὐτοῖς, αὐτῶν δὲ διηνοίχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἐπέγνωσαν αὐτόν. … ἐγνώσθη αὐτοῖς ἐν τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου.